Everybody's

MARCH, 1927
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by ARED WHITE

and THREE *Vigorous Novelettes*

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March
1927

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Volume LVI
No. 3

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Advertising section continued in rear of book

Ared White's
new war story

The WATCH on the RHINE

AS THE first scattering notes of the division's lately improvised marching song rose from tired throats up near the head of the trudging column, Corporal McGee reached instinctively for the big silver watch that hung on a heavy link chain in the upper bellows pocket of his blouse just under his bright new croix de guerre. He consulted the faded dial of the ancient timepiece ostentatiously.

"Seven o'clock by Heinie's watch," he announced in a voice loud enough to be heard by the seven sullen members of his squad. "Seven o'clock. Another hour 'n' a half yet to hike!"

There was a groan as of protest at this needless reminder of the hour.

"Ah, perk up and take the gaff smilin'," he bantered them. "Ain't you gettin' the Rhine for a Christmas present? Another ten days by Heinie's watch and you'll be in soft billets eatin' boche poison with your Christmas pork 'n' beans."

"Wish you'd throw Heinie's watch in the Rhine!" muttered some one disgustedly.

The song up ahead began to gather form. Dragging feet that sloshed through thin mud and scraped over rough cobblestones along the endless course of sinuous gray kilometers that led to the Rhine lifted a bit less heavily as the rollicking refrain swept through the ranks. Battalion and company officers smiled wearily or pretended not to hear. Anything had warrant enough that would bring spirit back into their leg-weary men.

> The general got the croix de guerre,
> *Parlez vous,*
> The general got the croix de guerre,
> *Parlez vous,*
> The general got the croix de guerre,
> The son of a gun was never there,
> Hinky, dinky, *parlez vous!*

It rose, like a wind at sea, from an eddying swirl among a few squads to a rhythmatic storm hurled into the gray dreariness of the dying day by the strong lungs of six thousand men. Feet began dragging in cadence to the music. Shoulders that had drooped nearly to the waist under the heavy full field packs began rising higher. A bugler who a moment before had been all but staggering in exhaustion found strength to trumpet a crude accompaniment, using the five tones of his bugle scale to catch a chord here and there. Another bugler picked it up, and another. The march to the Rhine suddenly became, for the moment, all but a blithesome promenade.

PRESENTLY taut arms arose fully extended above the heads of the majors who sagged wearily in saddles at the heads of battalions. It was the signal for the hourly halt. Barely half an hour had passed since the last halt; but dusk was gathering swiftly and who could know for certain that the new division commander himself might not dash back along the line at any moment in his military limousine to note the progress of this record hike of forty kilometers today. The song died out as suddenly as it had commenced as the men fell gratefully in their tracks at the sides of the road for ten minutes' surcease from the day's grueling advance. Regimental commanders breathed easier. It was one thing to have one of this fighting division's allotment of French war crosses given to the new division commander, who had joined them from some imposing staff assignment after the armistice had been duly signed.

It might prove another thing should that new division commander, in the course of the division's march to the Rhine, learn the men's opinion of the transaction as perpetuated in song. The music might be well enough for the men's marching morale; but then it might not, at the same time, stir the general's fancy in a way that would be good for the morale of the brigade, regimental and battalion commanders, anon, when they were part of the American watch on the Rhine.

Corporal McGee, sitting on his unslung pack while his men lay motionless about him, got out the big silver watch again and held it before him as the hands ticked swiftly toward that instant when he must get them back in column again. He invariably found some excuse for bringing the timepiece into use when the song was in the air. To him the watch was his alibi—a reminder to his squad that his own croix de guerre had not been issued to him with the ration or passed to him by some obsequious staff person.

"Five minutes more to go, by Heinie's watch!" he announced with forced airiness, heroically putting aside an impulse to cast himself alongside his men on the wet ground and pass into slumber.

"Wish you'd left that boche clock where you got it from," grumbled a private, without raising his weary head from the ground. "It's allus takin' the joy out o' life."

"One minute left to go-get ready!" the corporal cautioned them, taking his own place manfully in the road, ready for the gruff chorus of "fall in" that presently would come from the officers.

He put the big silver watch carefully back in the bellows pocket of his coat under the croix de guerre. The watch had validated his war cross again. It had shielded his own decoration from the devlish innuendo of that song. Since the appearance, and instant popularity, of the musical satire on the general's cross, Corporal McGee had found the silver watch a source of comfort and gratification, as well as of utility. It was a grim token of the manner in which he had served, one whose mortal glory no mere song might dim. It was symbolical of that breathless moment in the crimson Argonne when he had gone ahead of his platoon to engage a German machine-gun crew hand to hand, vanquishing them with the bayonet in a desperate encounter against odds.

On one of his antagonists—the one he had vowed was the size of two ordinary men—he had found the ancient silver timepiece. Its owner had the watch chained to his belt, apparently for ready consultation against the moment when he need hold his position no longer and might retire to a place of greater security following the retreating German riflemen. Now the watch could not have been slow. It kept excellent time. Corporal McGee, in the momentary frenzy of battle that sometimes seizes individuals and endows them with the courage of a dozen men, simply had been ahead of schedule.

The corporal had cleaned his bayonet in the mud and slipped the watch remorselessly into his pocket. He was robbing no one. The German would have no further use for it. The corporal took it as one imbued with the common practises of the battlefield might take a spiked helmet or a Luger pistol or a sawtooth bayonet. Thoughts of its one-time owner and his untimely end haunted the corporal as little as a rabbit's foot or sealskin sack might fret its possessor. War begets its own peculiar conscience in such matters. And this silver watch, with the name engraved in German script inside the heavy hunting case, was a souvenir such as only a first-class fighting man might hope to possess by means other than purchase. Non-combatants, denizens of deep command dugouts, might win the croix de guerre by rank or favor—but how were they to validate their crosses in the eyes of the combat men?

"SNAP into it—keep movin' there!" Corporal McGee fumed, as the members of his squad took their places beside him in the long sluggish column that moved off grudgingly in that eternal sloshing and scraping of heavy feet that were moving toward the Rhine.

"Are they goin' to hike us clean on to Berlin without stoppin' for sleep?" a private of his squad demanded querulously.

"Another two hours by Heinie's watch and you'll all be tucked away in a nice boche feather bed—sleepin' with one eye open to keep Heinie's wife from stickin' a knife in between your ribs," he cheered them.

"Two hours more o' this an' I'll be lyin' dead 'longside the road," groaned another member of the squad.

Corporal McGee felt his first concern that one or two of his squad might give up the hike and join the footsore and weak of will who made up the ambulance and truck riding slackers. Not a single member of his company had so disgraced himself. The corporal shuddered at the thought of such dishonor coming to his own squad.

"Ah, you birds just think you're gettin' tired out," he bantered them. "You ain't even had good legexercise yet today!"

His own feet came out of the thin mud heavily, each of them seeming to weigh more than the sixty-pound pack on his back; and he all but winced every time one of his raw feet struck a submerged cobblestone in the muddy road. But sense of responsibility fed his sinews and strengthened him in carrying his own fatigue while laughing at the others. And it fed his strength, this laughing at the others, and cheering them on; attesting his own superiority of moral and physical fiber which a leader must have.

"Bet I could talk you buddies into hikin' all night an' all tomorrow an' the only kick you'd make was when I asked you to stop to rest or eat!" he challenged them whimsically, intent on keeping the thought fixed in their minds that they really were far from exhausted.

"I'll bet ye another five kilometers and ye'll need a ambulance fer the second squad," came a vacant threat from the ranks.

"But supposin'," chuckled the corporal, "supposin' I'd jus' give the order 'squads right about' and inform you the watch on the Rhine was all off an' we was startin' back to Brest to catch a Christmas boat home, what'd happen?"

"It'd take a darned fast horse to keep up with me," announced one of the squad.

"You said somethin', buddy," came a voice from the squad in rear. "I could do it to Brest in nothin' flat if they'd only turn me loose and gimme the road."

"That's different. Course we could do that," echoed some one in his own squad.

"You all agree?" Corporal McGee asked them.

"It wouldn't be a march, it'd be a stampede," another averred feelingly. The others muttered their assent.

Corporal McGee chuckled triumphantly. There had been method in his queries.

"Then it all goes to prove you birds ain't as tired as you might be," he charged them. "It's mostly homesickness just like you had it last year at Christmas time when you'd nothin' to do but lay around billets. Now cut out your dream stuff and quit laggin'. Come on now, snap into it. Ain't you gettin' the Rhine for Christmas—an' maybe a slit throat!"

CORPORAL McGEE'S diagonsis which he had emphasized thus to his own advantage as squad leader, was flawless. The war was over. In the minds of the men who fought it, the conflict ended November eleventh. Up to the hour of eleven o'clock of that greatest of days in human experience they had been somber super-men, baiting a death-dealing Frankenstein in its lair with little thought of what life might hold for them when this desperate mission were ended—if it should ever end. Life was too insecure, and the demands of duty too sacred, to reckon deeply with the future. And at fifteen minutes after the hour of eleven they were so many homesick men and boys with their thoughts upon home, and Christmas; reckoning the chances of getting to the base ports and back home in civies again for Christmas day. What a Christmas present!

The unfailing grapevine, greatest of

Army communications, had brought their home-bound orders to the ——th Division every day after the armistice until that dismal hour when the crushing official orders actually arrived with the calamitous information that they were crossing the Rhine, rather than the Atlantic, for Christmas day of 1918.

Generals and colonels—and an occasional major—might find a thrill in the thought that "*Die Wacht Am Rhine*" was going to have a new set of works—American works; even in the leading of a victorious army on past Coblenz to Berlin itself, or around the world for that matter. But for the butcher boys, clerks, farm hands, students, brokers, artists and artisans who made up the ranks a more dismal disaster could not come into their lives at Christmas time.

FIFTEEN miles a day they had marched in the early stages of the advance—an easy hike, readily completed before noon. With the four other veteran combat divisions that had been taken from the flower of the brilliant Liggett's fighting First Army to make up the invading Third Army, their advance was by "bounds," which is to say that they marched three days or so and rested an equal period in cities along the route, billeting with the natives in accordance with carefully wrought military plans. In France, and throughout that borderland where France and Germany merged into an area whose populace had cultivated the art of enthusiastic welcome for conqueror, whomever he might be, their march was one triumphal procession, noisy throngs packing the streets and countryside waving flags and cheering *Vive les Américaines* or *Vive les Allies.*

Now they had entered into the true Rhineland whose allegiance to the Kaiser had paid its full toll of sons and gold into the Prussian cause, and the olive drabbed columns were met with a sodden, almost sullen indifference. Sober faces peered discreetly from behind closed windows. Conquered were looking with dire forebodings, if not with smouldering venom, upon conqueror. The advance guard was reenforced. Strong connecting groups were put out to maintain liaison with other allied columns marching on parallel routes to the north and south in readiness for instant deployment. The security measures were those of an advance in the face of the enemy. Occasional glimpses were to be had of the shattered German war machine as its jaded rear guards faded sullenly into the gray distance barely ahead of the American advance parties. Anything might happen.

Only an occasional old man appeared on a street corner in the villages to watch the Americans parade by at rigid attention; flags flying at the head of regiments in the main column behind the advance guards, bands blaring American march music. Old men, and the ubiquitous small boy, the latter drawn to the bands in small droves as by a magnet and trooping fearlessly along, big-eyed and beaming; stirred by the thrumming drums and throbbing brass, thrilling innocently to the compelling rhythm of "Stars and Stripes Forever" quite as if it had been some Teuton martial quickstep proclaiming "*Deutschland Über Alles!*"

Today's historic march of forty kilometers had begun at daybreak. It would bring the division late at night through the final stage of the long hike. Tomorrow and the next day, and perhaps the day after that, the men would rest in billets near the west bank of the Rhine, replace worn-out uniforms, shoes and impedimenta, and then sweep on across to the east shore of the haughty river into the heart of Rhenish Prussia, a spic-and-span bit of fighting mechanism bent on seeing to it that the Kaiser's hosts made good the hard terms of the armistice they had signed.

HEINIE'S watch, which Corporal McGee found occasional vindication in quoting, had ticked off two heavy hours before the fatigue driven column tumbled into German billets at the end of the final "bound." And its stocky little hour hand had completed six revolutions of the ancient dial before the column, now rested and fully outfitted, found the proud old Rhine rolling humbly under their democratic American feet as they trod, route step, toward the beckoning spires of Coblenz in that moment of pulsating magnificence when the Stars and Stripes rose suddenly over stern old Ehrenbreitstein, replacing the Prussian red, white and black—and all that those colors symbolized by way of evil omen to the world.

"The thing ain't as wide as the Hudson," announced some one disparagingly.

If the men in the ranks had been fired for the moment by the portentous significance of their arrival at the Rhine, their sense of the dramatic moment which thrilled a continent at home, quickly gave way to the spirit of badinage which the now humble stream itself aroused. It had been forbidden them that they scoff at persons and things along the route of march. Not that the feelings of their broken foemen mattered—but such a show is not of a well-disciplined army. The river, however, was an inanimate thing even though it did seem to echo of the one-time splendor of the vaunted Hohenzollerns.

"It's a crick 'longside the Miss'sippi," another soldier proclaimed.

"I wouldn't trade a quart of the muddy ol' Missouri fer the whole thing," another insisted with feeling.

"Gimme the Columbia fer mine," chorused a soldier from the far West; and the rivers of America followed in quick succession.

A warning order came snapping down the column and brought them back to the serious business at hand. The moment was at hand when they would cross into the great Prussian city itself. The new division commander would add to the import of the occasion, and to his own martial traditions, by personally reviewing this division as it set foot east of the Rhine. His large red command flag with its two white stars could be seen unfurled in the distance, just beyond the bridge-approach on the Coblenz side. The men began checking their accouterment and blouse-buttons. A few lapsed into a gentle humming of the division marching song, brought to their vagrant minds by proximity of the new division commander; but officers quickly suppressed them with sharp words of reprimand or caution. This was no time for such foolishness.

CORPORAL McGEE, at the first humming notes, instinctively reached for the big silver watch that hung on a heavy link chain in the upper bellows pocket of his blouse, in full vindication of his own bright new croix de guerre.

"Right on time, fellows," he announced plausibly. "Right here to the dot. An' say, fellows, ever stop to think that Heinie's watch's back on the Rhine—with me carryin' it? Let 'em write a song about that if they want to!"

The division snapped into its best military stride as it swept from the bridge with a magnificent "eyes right" for the stern-visaged new division commander who stood reviewing them with arms folded and a brooding martial air that hinted of "Napoleon at Friedland"; then on through the principal business section of Coblenz with every man putting himself into the business of presenting a proud and lasting spectacle of armed superiority before the awed eyes of a conquered host. The Germans had laughed a year ago, had they? Well, let them take a close-up of these despised American volunteers and see what it was that had amused them so. Let them laugh now if there was humor left in their souls! The thought was expressed in the demeanor of every marcher as feet rose and fell with perfect unison, shoulders dipped with a splendidly coordinated rhythm and eyes looked hard and fast straight to the front in those files that covered off as perfectly as if they had been laid by field transit.

The streets were all but empty except for the inevitable old folks and the everlasting small boys; but the invaders sensed the thousands of eyes that were observing them carefully, and estimating them anxiously, from behind windows and curtains. Let all such form their own opinion as to whether such men might be temporized with; whether isolated treachery, poison in food and knife-thrusts in the dark might be indulged in with impunity!

At the end of an interminable parade, when the populace must have been duly impressed, the columns broke into regiments, then into battalions, companies and finally on down into squads as the elaborate billeting plans unfolded; and such men as had been selected for duty within the city itself marched off to present themselves at the homes which were to receive and shelter them.

CORPORAL McGEE brought his own squad to an impressive halt, late in the afternoon, in front of a plain-appearing stone house in the residential district. It was one of an endless row of houses, all alike, of the kind occupied by the better middle class, two stories and attic, distinctive only in the possession of steep slate roof and green shutters. Before presenting his billeting ticket, the corporal faced his men impressively and gave them their final instructions.

"Remember, fellows, no fraternizin' with the enemy. Get that! That's one thing the cap'n won't stand for. Remember we're dealin' with the enemy. What's more, we're conquerors an' we got to act our part. The cap'n says we're to keep our hats on in the house even when wimmin folks is present. You ain't to say 'thanks' for nothin' they try to do for you. Wear sidearms all the time an' if any of 'em tries to knife you—well you knows what to do without bein' told. Now then, in we goes!"

He strode firmly to the door and rapped decisively.

A middle-aged woman, thin, gray, and with a cold reserve in her careworn face, answered the summons. She reached in a dignified, detached way for the billeting ticket that Corporal McGee held out to her; then paused suddenly, hand extended without taking the ticket, the while she stood staring at the members of the squad who were assembled in wide-eyed expectancy about the door stoop. Her expression changed to one of startled surprise as she looked slowly from one to the other as if she had been suddenly confronted by some unbelievable phantom.

"What's matter, marm—don't you like the looks o' my crew?" broke in the corporal nervously, turning to look at the squad as if to learn what caused her sudden change of humor. "Not a bad bunch o' lads if they ain't ruffled."

She turned with a start to the corporal, looking at him with wide puzzled eyes, then took the billeting ticket without looking at it.

"Why, you are just a few liddle boys, no different much as mein Heinrich," she exclaimed in a voice that reflected her perplexity and seemed to carry a measure of sudden and unexpected approval of them.

She threw the door wide open confusedly, still staring from one to the other, and led them silently to their sleeping-places on the second floor. Three rooms, the billeting ticket called for—and there were three comfortable rooms with two large feather beds in each room, rug carpets on the floor, a few pictures on the walls and other evidences of homelike luxury such as belonged to a cherished but dimly remembered past existence. While they laid out their meager possessions from their packs and prepared to make themselves comfortable in their temporary German domicile, she bustled back and forth dragging large rocking-chairs into the rooms and adding bits of bric-à-brac as if under a sudden impulse to minister further to their comfort.

"Is it you haf hunger?" she asked them suddenly when they were settled and she had finished rearranging their rooms.

The suggestion found instant response.

"Hungry's right—hungry enough to eat a slab o' raw salt pork," exclaimed Corporal McGee spontaneously.

"I haf some nice cakes und some tea should make if you will wish for it," she tempted them, with a friendly smile.

"Cakes!" exclaimed one of the squad. "Is they any such thing in the world! If they is lead me to 'em. It's sure be a life-saver Mrs.—."

"Fenstermacher—Frau Fenstermacher," she supplied the name. She bustled out of the room and downstairs; and members of the squad could hear distinctly the exquisite music of clattering chinaware as the spread was being made ready for them. It was late afternoon. The noon meal had consisted of two heavy sandwiches, designed to carry them through the last brief hike across the Rhine and tide their stomachs over until the company messes were set up to ladle out hot food late that evening. As for cake, it had vanished entirely from their lives that same day the Statue of Liberty sank into the hazy skyline behind them. Cake and war had remained persistent strangers throughout the length and breadth of France.

"THINK of real cake and tea," Corporal McGee fairly gloated, betrayed for the moment by his treacherous appetite; for in common with the other youngsters of twenty-two and under who made up the bulk of the fighting forces, and all of Corporal McGee's squad, his stomach had found few moments of actual delight in this thing of war. The veneer of discipline swept him suddenly and rescued him from his peril. He jumped to his feet and faced his squad sternly, remembering his duty.

"Put on you hats, you birds—what did I tell you about how you was to act!" he ordered them, covering his own head abruptly by way of example.

"Your cake und tea it is ready—and I haf found some cold poultry," came the inviting voice of Mrs. Fenstermacher from below.

Corporal McGee held the others in the room with an abrupt warning order of his hand. Then he marched manfully and with true martial stride out into the hall, downstairs and faced Mrs. Fenstermacher, hat in hand again.

"Where are der oder liddle boys," she smiled lightly. Her kindly face and the sight of cakes and viands on the table nearly swept the corporal from his course.

"Thank you—thank you, Mrs. Fenstermacher—but we can't put you to a lot of fuss over us," he stammered. "Besides it ain't—"

"It's not any troubles," she said earnestly. "It will gif me pleasure to see you liddle boys eat. Come, die tea it will cold get."

The corporal, recovering himself in his habit of obeying orders, dashed his recalcitrant hat back on to his head and blurted out the worst.

"We ain't allowed to fraternize with the enemy," he said thickly and turned quickly back upstairs as if in search of a refuge, leaving Frau Fenstermacher to look after him in pained wonderment.

"Now you fellows pretty near stubbed your toe first rattle," he cautioned his squad once he had assembled them in his own room and closed the door.

"If it's agin orders to eat a piece of cake with a nice old German lady, then this is goin' to be a fine Christmas package they handed us," protested one of the squad.

"And I'll bet she sure can make cake," spoke up another of the disgusted seven. "She looks just like Sergeant Billie Walters' mother back home and she made the best cakes in the world—next to my own mother."

"Yes, an' for all you knows the old lady'd slip a few pinches of rat poison in the tea and then where'd we all be? The cap'n 'd know right away we hadn't followed orders and we wouldn't even get a decent military funeral. We got to remember that these folks is our enemy and we can't mix with 'em," the corporal warned them.

BUT if Frau Fenstermacher's cake and tea went untouched that afternoon; if the corporal and his squad wore their hats and their sidearms about the place when they were there during the off-duty hours of the next few days, the end of a week found these precautionary habits laid aside almost entirely; and Mrs. Fenstermacher's cake had a habit of disappearing as quickly as it was baked.

NOT only in Corporal McGee's squad, but among squads wherever billeted, the nightly relations became more those of host and guest. Neither conquered nor conqueror measured up to previous expectations of one another. Living under the same roof seemed to bring the amazing discovery to them that all were mere human beings, moved by similar impulses and attributes. The Americans, strangely enough, neither pillaged, plundered nor pushed people arrogantly off the sidewalks into the streets. Moreover they were a cheerful, kindly lot among whom women and children were quite safe. Why, their own Teuton troops had not behaved themselves so much as gentlemen and been such tolerant and tractable billet guests!

"These Americans are not savage beasts as we had been led to expect," was the word that went around among the civilian populace at the end of a week of nervous observation.

"These Heinies are not going to stick knives in our backs while we're asleep—they're a mighty hospitable lot and don't rob us the way the French did," was the American estimate that passed from mouth to mouth in the billets at the end of the week of watchful observation.

"Propaganda!" cautioned the French high command sharply, bringing pointedly to the attention of the American high command the reports of French liaison officers that a spirit of flagrant, if not open, fraternization with the enemy was springing up between the German populace and American soldiers.

"Those artful Huns are laying it on thick trying to win the hearts of the American soldiers and gain favor at the peace table," shouted the British war office, urging that the practise be wiped out summarily.

New and rigid orders came out forthwith against fraternizing with the enemy. They were emphasized at officers' assemblies and passed on down through every channel of command to the squad leaders themselves, who carried them to the men in the billets.

CORPORAL McGEE carried his orders to his own squad with righteous indignation at their derelictions, reflecting the spirit that had come on down to him from the higher command with unerring precision and spirit, as becomes a squad leader. He saw the thing in its proper light now that it had been made clear to him. Chevrons had come to him within a month after he left his job as an apprentice brick-maker to help win the war, and he always had taken his responsibility seriously, carrying out his orders without fear or maudlin sympathy for those who were wont to complain of military exactitude.

"Let me warn you birds again," he admonished them, "this fraternizin' with the enemy has got to stop right now."

"Seems to me you've been eating your share of the enemy's cake," retorted Private Jones, the most outspoken of the squad, whose first year at college, interrupted by the war, had given him critical propensities.

"New orders has come today and I want this fraternizin' cut out," the corporal asserted himself. "We got to remember we're conquerors and not get too gay with the natives."

"Don't being conquerors rank us a piece of cake and cup of tea once in a while," persisted Private Jones, encouraged to debate the matter by the sympathetic attitude of his buddies and the past culpability of his corporal. "'Specially when the enemy's a nice old mother who says she's adopted us and wants us to be happy while we're at her house."

"It's boche propaganda," affirmed Corporal McGee. "The cap'n told us all about it. He got it straight from the colonel who got it right from the general himself."

"Stuff!" sneered the squad spokesman.

"It's not stuff neither," Corporal McGee affirmed. "I been thinkin' it over on the way up here and it is kinda odd the way these Heinies are treatin' us. What should this old lady want to make us a lot of cakes and feed us all the time if she didn't have some motive? She's got her orders from the Kaiser direct if we only knew the truth. The cap'n said as much about all of 'em. He says we can't make friends out of our enemies and get away with it."

"Stuff!" persisted the obsurate Jones. "Don't we know what's got under the feelings of Mrs. Fenstermacher. The only thing that's puzzlin' us is that she don't want to put rat poison in the cake."

"What you mean?"

"Didn't she get confidential with us the other night," Private Jones narrated feelingly, "and tell us she had three boys of her own in this war—and that none of 'em came back—an' that they were all just kids—an' the last of 'em killed in the Argonne fracas! And wasn't there tears come into her eyes when she tells us that she was expecting a lot of long-bearded cutthroats and—when she saw us come up she said that except for the uniform we might've been her own boys coming back home. And she says to us—she likes to imagine we are her boys back in the house again and she wants to take care of us until we go back where we'll have our own mothers. That may sound like propaganda to the cap'n or it may sound like mush to you, Corporal McGee, but not to us that was there and heard her say it."

CORPORAL McGEE swallowed hard and sat in wide-eyed reflection for some minutes, debating Private Jones' disclosure against the captain's stern warning. Mothers were really baffling creatures. He never had been able to fathom the strange feelings akin to awe that they had awakened back in the training camps when they had revealed themselves to him as hallowed beings who alone seemed to sound the depths of tragedy and scale the heights of courage that went into this somber business of sending an army of their boys away to battle. There came into his memory the grim pathos of a brave smile he had seen, time and again, following some lad from his mother's face until the troop train was lost in the distance. Then see her break and fall! The memory of mothers he had seen at the troop trains had come up before him suddenly to haunt him in battle when youngsters he had known fell.

He put the picture out of his mind suddenly. What had that to do with fraternizing with the enemy, he demanded of himself. Why permit his squad to be taken in further by organized propaganda intended to disarm their suspicions and gain their favor for no good purpose? There was no craftiness of which these Germans were not capable. He had his orders and he would assert them.

"You birds talk like you ain't growed up," he charged them.

"If you're a growed-up sample then I never want to be one," retorted Private Jones.

"All I got to say," the corporal replied stubbornly, sensing the unsympathetic attitude of his squad, "you'd better not let me catch you fraternizin' with the enemy. Take your own chances if you quit bein' soldiers—an' if you get in the hoosegow don't ask for no sympathy from yours trooly. I can't be here every second to watch you—but after this watch your step when I'm around!"

"Then all I got to say to the corporal is that you're kiddin' yourself out of a mighty fine Christmas dinner right here in this billet," Private Jones asserted disgustedly.

THE Christmas spirit had been in the air for a week. Every one sensed it without realizing very definitely just what it was until the day was hard upon them. Christmas was a day to reckon with this year, for the bounty of peace was hung in the world's stocking. Christmas was no longer a hollow mockery, even though it brought sad memories and heavy hearts in its wake. It held at least a glad portend for Christmas days to come, Christmas days when the gaping wounds and blinding hurts of war were as nearly healed as the miracle of time can heal them. The spirit of Christmas must have been at bottom of this fraternization that winked covertly at stern orders; the spirit that nurtured good will among men along with the peace that now had come in just ahead of the Yuletide.

Corporal McGee's squad, less Corporal McGee, decided to make it a day. Frau Fenstermacher herself had invited them to a Christmas dinner, to be held in the evening behind closed doors, after they had returned from their own company mess. Private Jones had suggested a Christmas tree. The others had fallen in with the spirit of the enterprise avidly. It would help drive away the ominous blue devils of gloom that had invaded their division at Christmas time a year ago and gnawed at the entrails of strong men and boys. These same haunting blue devils were in the offing now and they could be counted upon to haunt the camps at Christmastide until those camps were a thing of black memory.

Corporal McGee scoffed at the idea and flatly refused to have anything to do with such an affair. He shut the squad off from telling him too much of their plans. What he did not know would not hurt his conscience as corporal. If they were intent on making fools of themselves behind his back—it was their affair. He could not remain eternally at the billet and spy upon their every move. And he was not the kind to report his whole squad in to the captain.

"I'm goin' up to Bonn for the Christmas ball-game and root for our bunch while they clean up on the Canucks," he told them gruffly. "I'm gettin' back home here about ten o'clock and leavin' it to you not to do nothin' you shouldn't do!"

"Don't be a saphead," Private Jones badgered him. "We're having a real Christmas tomorrow. Ma Fenstermacher's having in a few little kids that's minus dads as a result of this war, and we're giving 'em some chocolate tins from the commissary and we got some dolls and sleds and skates for 'em. Then Ma Fenstermacher's going to—"

"You can't get away with that stuff—that's fraternizin' with the enemy," Corporal McGee answered warmly. "What'd the cap'n say if he—"

"Cap'n shucks," laughed Private Smith, the youngest member of the squad, a red-faced cherub of sixteen. "He's in about the same fix you'se in on this fraternizin' business, I guess."

"What do you mean?" demanded the corporal.

"Didn't me and Jonesey run into him this afternoon? We goes into a store to buy some dolls and skates. We just git started when in waltzes the cap'n. We hid out fast behind a counter—and what does the cap'n do but buy a half dozen dolls and some skates, tin soldiers and a lot of truck, lookin' around nervous like at the door every minute. Then he has 'em wrapped up and carries 'em out in the company mail-bag actin' just like he was pullin' off a bank stick-up. What's that but fraternizing? Or maybe you think he was gettin' them dolls for his dear little pet corp'rals and sergeants."

"If he bought them things it was to send to his own kids at home," protested Corporal McGee loyally. "You wouldn't catch the cap'n fraternizin' with the enemy after the way he laid it out to us about these Dutch."

"You're right that no one 'll catch him," asserted Private Smith acridly. "Leave that to him. But just the same the cap'n's goin' to fraternize—and German kids 'll be playin' with that sackful o' toys before Christmas is over."

"Well, anyhow," retorted Corporal McGee bluntly, "you ain't goin' to see me taken in by none of this boche propaganda and rewardin' these Dutch for killin' off our buddies by givin' 'em a nice Christmas present. And you birds better be in your feather beds when I get in from Bonn at ten o'clock."

He stalked from the room with an air of washing his hands of the whole affair and leaving them alone to their perilous and treasonable folly.

FROM a Third Army truck driver who made the long supply haul up the Rhine to regiments billeted in the Rhenish hill lands the squad secured a small fir tree for five marks. They smuggled it into their billet late at night, hidden in shelter halves and ponchos lest their premeditated plan of fraternizing with the enemy awaken the ready suspicions of the military police.

"Nice Christmas spirit," grumbled Private Jones when the tree was safely inside. "Nice Christmas spirit when you got to sneak around about it like robbin' somebody's watermelon patch."

But the Christmas spirit lost nothing of its zest for all of its perils; and it was with something akin to bubbling youthful enthusiasm that the seven temporarily transplanted youngsters strung pop-corn and devised colored paper ornaments for the tree under Frau Fenstermacher's skilful instructions. No blue devils should haunt them this Christmas. It was really not such a bad Christmas after all. They would put nothing on the tree for one another. The monthly war wage of privates, after the allotments for Liberty bonds and what-not had been deducted, put a strain upon their combined resources in buying dolls and trinkets for the youngsters that Frau Fenstermacher was to have in for the evening. And besides, they had bought for her a Christmas surprise—a warm new cape of real cloth, not cheap ersatz material, at the staggering cost of seventy marks.

"I was just thinkin'," ruminated Private Smith when their Christmas arrangements had been completed and they were assembled upstairs in their billet ready for bed on Christmas eve, "I was just thinkin' that I'm gettin' more kick outa this Christmas than if the tree was goin' to be loaded with things for me alone, like it used to be back home. And none of us gettin' a thing either."

"Don't be too sure none of us ain't getting a thing," Private Jones rejoined cynically. "If they catch us romping around that tree with that old lady and these kids the whole bunch of us is likely to get about six months in the hoosegow for fraternizin' with the enemy."

WHEN Corporal McGee approached his billet, glum and blue from a dismal, cheerless Christmas which not even the drubbing his buddies gave the Canadians at Bonn served to dispel, his ears were greeted by the unmistakable sound of revelry. The squad was trying to sing a discordant ensemble that served nevertheless to herald their high spirits. It enraged him that they not only had ignored taps but were cavorting thus noisily at ten o'clock on Christmas night in open fraternization with the enemy. As he entered the hall of the billet in high wrath and firm purpose, he found that the door to the living-room shut off the merriment. He pounded officiously on the door. Mutual disgrace could only come of such conduct should the noise come to the attention of the military police. He would assert his authority at once.

Frau Fenstermacher had answered the door and seized him irresistibly by the arm before he could announce his stern humor. She bustled him quickly inside to the table that was littered with the remnants of cakes and tempting viands, and upon which stood two half-empty bottles of Rhine wine which she had served up after the custom of the country. His squad gathered about him on the instant in noisy and effusive greeting. Corporal McGee remained inflexible.

"I thought I told you birds to be in bed by ten o'clock," he raged, ignoring Frau Fenstermacher's tender of a chair. He left his hat on his head, set at an arrogant angle.

"The children's gone with their dolls 'n' things but you shoulda seen 'em—eyes big as saucers and they had the time o' their lives," effused Private Smith unaffected by the corporal's martial austerity. "Say 'n' you ought to see what we give Ma Fenstermacher!"

Another member of the squad brought the cape gaily from a chair in the corner of the room and had her put it on for inspection. The corporal did not look.

"Nice bunch—fraternizin' with the enemy an' me up to Bonn rootin' for our buddies while they clean up the Canucks!" he sneered unyieldingly.

FRAU FENSTERMACHER took him in hand firmly, removing his hat and seating him in spite of himself at the table before an uncut layer cake and a glass of wine with an expertness that bespoke long practise and expert knowledge in the art of handling stubborn striplings. In a few moments his overcoat was off and his grumbling silenced for the moment. She led him off into a discussion of the game at Bonn and clapped her hands with delight at the news that the Americans had won over their Canadian allies. In the finesse of her skill in bringing him into something of the spirit of the merry squad she chanced presently to inspect his croix de guerre with an intimate and friendly interest.

"Und that pretty medal is for being a goot soldier in der wars?" she asked him guilelessly.

Private Jones leaped from his seat on the instant and raised his hand to the members of the squad.

"All together fellows," he announced hilariously. "All together—the division song. Sing!" As he led off the others picked up the air and words and carried the song through waggishly as if in answer to Frau Fenstermacher's inquiry.

The general got the croix de guerre,
Parlez vous,
The general got the croix de guerre,
Parlez vous,
The general got the croix de guerre,
The son of a gun was never there,
Hinky, dinky, *parlez vous!*

Corporal McGee reddened as he arose and reached instinctively for the big silver watch that hung on a heavy link chain in the upper bellows pocket of his blouse just under his bright new croix de guerre. As they ended the song with a jeering laugh he drew the watch forth and consulted the faded dial of the ancient timepiece ominously.

"That'll be all for you birds this night," he muttered decisively. "It's ten-fifteen by Heinie's watch—time for bad boys to be tucked in bed. All upstairs, you birds. Snap into it!"

THE sight of Frau Fenstermacher, suddenly frozen to a stark staring statue, her face white as death, swept upon them in the next instant. Her eyes were fixed upon the ancient timepiece that Corporal McGee held in his hand; and as he made to put it back in his pocket she laid her hand upon his wrist.

"Where did you came by it?" she asked in a low voice that trembled with some strong emotion.

"What—you mean that clock?" said the corporal airily. "I took it off a bull elephant of a—"

He stopped speaking suddenly, his voice arrested by an intuition that Frau Fenstermacher's tragic manner aroused. He turned quickly to another explanation.

"Why, I—I got that there watch from—from one o' them big French pawnbrokers—down there at Nancy—for ten francs," he stammered. "Why?"

"It was mein liddle Heinrich's," Frau Fenstermacher whispered simply, taking the watch and pressing it pathetically to her lips.

She opened the hunting case and held it up before them.

"See," she whispered, pointing to the inscription in German script. "It is der name of his fadder also. Heinrich. He haf it at Sedan und he gif it to liddle Heinrich, to bring him safe back from der wars like it did for his fadder. But no, it was not so for mein liddle Heinrich. Some low Frencher kilt mein Heinrich und took his watch."

The Christmas gaiety in the German billet was replaced by the noisy ticking of the clock over the mantel. Corporal McGee stood gaping in the throes of a sudden rending revelation. Frau Fenstermacher no longer puzzled him. She was disclosed—the mother of a soldier.

"Maybe," he said when he could direct a voice that seemed intent on choking him, "maybe you'll—let me give it back to you—for a Christmas present."

Two Million in LOOT

Almost Single-Handed a Master Criminal Plans to Rob a Treasure Ship

by
FRANK H. SHAW

“AS A rule we don’t carry passengers in the Head boats,” said the managing clerk politely.

“You’ve got a bit of passenger accommodation, though, haven’t you?” asked the gentle, persuasive applicant. “I’ve had a nervous breakdown, you see; and can’t stand a crowd, such as you’ll find on the regular liners. If there were any windjammers left afloat I’d pick one of them; but as there aren’t, the next best thing seems a steady-going freighter, since my doctor said a sea-voyage would make a new man of me.”

“Well, sometimes we do make an exception,” the managing clerk admitted; “but you mustn’t look for swimming-baths and suites de luxe, you know, sir.”

“I’ve roughed it a goodish bit, one way and another. And my man—companion-servant chap, you know—he’s very handy and adaptable.”

“I’ll see what can be done,” the clerk said. “It’s really up to the superintendent and the captain himself—Captain Holyoake’s in command of the *Berkeley Head.*”

“You might do your best for me.”

“All right, Mr.—”

“Wendover. Here’s the letter from that Harley Street man advising the voyage. If your boats sailed a bit oftener I’d ask to go at once; but I dare say a week’s wait won’t harm me. The *Berkeley Head’s* due to sail next Saturday, isn’t she?”

“She is, sir, for Pernambuco first, then coastwise down to the Plate, and on through Magellan to Valparaiso.”

“Sounds a good, varied trip to me, mister. It’s the length and quietness of it that appeals. Don’t sting me too heavily with the fare—there’ll be two of us, you see; but we can share the same cabin. How soon can you let me know?”

“That’s the super coming in just now, with Captain Holyoake; wait a bit, sir; and maybe—” Alexander Wendover seated himself a bit wearily while the clerk entered into consultation. He showed to Captain Holyoake’s discerning eyes as a grayish, tired man: probably a city man suffering from frayed nerves and overwork; a decent, biddable man, and harmless. Wendover, catching the seaman’s glance, smiled pathetically, almost appealingly.

“He’d be a bit of company on the trip—if he can play cribbage,” said Holyoake.

A Complete Novelette

"And we're not advertising that extra bit of freight," said the superintendent. "You can't be too careful nowadays, considering how daring these criminal gangs are."

"The best part of four tons of specie can't be carried ashore in a suit case," Holyoake laughed. "And I've carried a few tons safely in my time. When you're dealing with weighty stuff you know where you are—it isn't like diamonds. I'm not worrying, if that's all that stands in the road. I doubt if there are half a dozen people know the *Berkeley's* carrying the gold this run, anyway."

"Well, if you think you're all right, I don't mind; all said and done, once the stuff is shipped aboard and the ship's out of port, the responsibility's yours."

"I fancy I'm big enough and ugly enough to shoulder it, Cap'n Wingates. If any one starts rough house with me he's liable to get hurt. That little runt there—I'd use him for a necktie if he started anything."

SO IT was agreed and arranged that Mr. Alexander Wendover should sail, accompanied by his personal valet, John Soames, in the S. S. *Berkeley Head* on her appointed sailing day, which was the following Saturday, the 19th of December. Wendover made out a check on a reputable bank for the twenty-five per cent. deposit of passage-money, and filled in the tedious forms necessary. Then he left the office, and as a man who has achieved success, made his way to a peaceful hostelry not far distant, and nodded in the inner parlor to a suave, lantern-jawed man who looked exactly like a gentleman's gentleman.

"That's that!" he mentioned quietly.

"Fixed it?" asked Soames.

"O. K. Have a spot?" They ordered whisky, and touched glasses. Over a secluded table they talked quietly; so quietly, indeed, that their voices did not carry so much as a yard—indeed, it was almost as though they read the words on one another's lips.

"Four hundred thousand in specie's worth making a try for," said Wendover.

"What's that in real money?"

"Two million bucks. In minted gold—English sovereigns. It's being sent out to stabilize the currency of one of those South American republics. It weighs four tons, roughly; and there won't be any guard to speak of, once it's aboard. They're treating it as casually as if it was crude ore; and that's to our advantage. If you like, we'll go down aboard the *Berkeley Head* and inspect our accommodation."

"Suits me," said Soames nonchalantly. and emptied his glass, with a muttered: "Here's fortune!" They left the hostelry and walked sedately down through the city streets, two inconspicuous figures; and nothing in their faces revealed the thoughts surging in their minds. But Wendover had made it his business to discover precisely how the specie was to be transported to its destination; and had availed himself of intricate secret channels to that end. Two million dollars was a sum certainly deserving of a bit of effort.

"What would you have done if they'd refused to allow us passages?" Soames asked as they came in view of the moored and idle freighter.

"Done something—stowed away, perhaps—got aboard, anyhow. That money's like a magnet to me, you know, my fingers itch every time I think of it. It isn't like diamonds, where you stand to lose fifty per cent. of their value in getting rid of them. Gold's gold, the world over, whether in coin, ingot or dust. It isn't often I set my mind on a thing so closely as I have done on this specie."

"Well, what beats me is how you're going to get it clear," said Soames, there among the shunting wagons, and the droning jib-cranes. "Might as well sit on the Bank of England and call yourself a millionaire!"

"You'll see when the time comes. There's more goes on behind my forehead than you'd give me credit for. You mightn't remember that I was a sailor once on a day though it's a longish time ago. What I don't know about a ship isn't worth knowing. I know a bit about sailormen, too; unless the breed's altered a lot since my young days. They're simple folk, and take men on their face value."

"All the same, I don't see how two of us are going to hold up a shipload of folks, even with the luck running straight."

"They might suspect more than two. But I've my own ideas—trust your Uncle Alec, Johnny. Men work for a lifetime to make a tenth of what we're aiming for; and two million bucks are worth a bit of planning." Soames nodded. He had great admiration for his confederate, who had devised more than one staggeringly successful coup in the science of securing easy money. Wendover never made the mistake of wasting his undeniable genius on small things—he left trifles to men of lesser caliber than himself.

How he had got wind of the shipment of specie hardly matters; he was well aware that four tons of minted gold was going out to Palabria, because he had authorized agents established here and there who kept him informed. He had learned that those responsible for the gold-shipment had decreed that it was in the long run safer to despatch it by ordinary freighter. No large liners plied directly to the Palabrian ports—to reach Santa Maria meant various transshipments, and each fresh transfer meant additional risk. A single case of the specie might vanish here, another there. You never knew; and the gangs focused their attention on the big ships, just as the lesser gangs devoted time to the exploitation of big hotels in preference to private dwellings.

If the gold were shipped in the bottom that would deliver it at its destination without any change, the percentage of risk was lessened. Short of the *Berkeley Head* being overpowered by an up-to-date pirate, her rich freight was as safe as if it had never left the bank-vaults. This was authority's point of view, and sound. But Wendover thought along different lines.

HE FOUND a thoroughly bored gangwayman on duty aboard the freighter; and was admitted into the listless ship, whose inward cargo was discharged and whose outward freight was not yet in sight. The *Berkeley Head's* mate was in his cabin, writing a letter to his girl, to tell her that he hoped to get a few days' leave prior to sailing. Johnson, the mate, always eyed strangers with an idea of their value to himself personally. You never knew—the most unlikely folks were often connected with shipping interests, and able to use influence to secure for a deserving man a fat command. Johnson wanted a command, so that he could marry the girl to whom his long letter would be addressed.

"Going out passenger?" he asked, when Wendover made known his business. "Good egg! Things get a bit monotonous normally. I'll show you round." And he acted as cicerone politely, hopefully; for Wendover, sizing him up, dropped a hint that he possessed influence with more than one shipping company. From the maple-and-mahogany saloon, he led them to the few passenger cabins, suggested alterations that would make for greater comfort. Now and then Wendover hinted that his own sea-experience was not negligible, and condoled with Johnson on the slowness of promotion for deserving, hard-working men. Johnson, the tour of inspection completed, was not above accepting an invitation to lunch ashore; and after an elaborate meal, with wine, expressed fresh pleasure at thought of passengers to relieve the dullness of open-water faring.

"Well, got any farther?" Soames asked, when the two were alone again.

"Those storm-doors over the forecastles are useful things," said Wendover. "It would take dynamite to shift 'em, once they were clamped; and I doubt if the *Berkeley Head* carries much dynamite among her small stores. I'd have liked to ask Johnson where the bullion was to be carried; but it's no use being too precipitate is it? Once the ship's out at sea will be time enough. Personally I'm very well pleased with everything, more hopeful than I was. We've made a friend."

And this was a prophetic statement, for when they boarded the *Berkeley Head* on the morning of sailing-day, Johnson greeted them affably, personally seeing to the stowage of their baggage. He explained that he'd had their chosen cabin redecorated; and if there was anything they required they need only ask for it. Captain Holyoake was genial, too—and was not above sampling Wendover's private store of above-proof whisky when invited so to do.

EXACTLY ten minutes before the appointed sailing-hour, two motor trucks drew up on the quay alongside the motionless *Berkeley Head*. They carried no marks to distinguish them from ordinary commercial vehicles; and their tarpaulin covers appeared inconspicuous. But a flush of color came into Wendover's sallow cheeks at their advent, none the less. Under the tarpaulins, he knew, were neat, compact cases of specie, each one holding a stereotyped five thousand sovereigns. The cases, as shown when the covers were drawn aside, were not unlike ammunition boxes, solidly made, carefully sealed, and bound about with iron bands. A fortune in gold; and Wendover, a money-lover, rubbed his mental hands. He liked money—especially gold. The miser instinct was his in a high degree. Thought of great possessions created in his soul a sort of fever. His eyes shone with more than their usual brightness. He nudged Soames.

"That's the stuff to give 'em," he whispered.

"Doesn't look much to me," said Soames. He had expected more ceremonial in shipping the specie—armed guards, probably a company of soldiers; much precaution and secrecy. A few casual dock policemen wandered, as it were aimlessly, to the vicinity. Perched on each truck were two or three men in plain clothes, whose jacket pockets bulged, that was all. The worth of a king's ransom was no more sensationally protected than if it had been so much common freight; its very bulk and weight being its greatest security. The ship's gangway was shifted, and ordinary lumpers began to unload the trucks and trip nimbly up the wide plank, each man carrying one case on his shoulder. Johnson stood at the ladder head, tallying the cases, unconcerned save to obtain the correct number. Occasionally he halted a man and inspected the case he carried, to satisfy himself that the seals were intact. The second mate saw to the safe stowage of the freight in a spare cabin, and was accompanied by a bank official, who pointed out to him the intactness of the seals. Sharp on the hour, the four hundred thousand pounds' worth of minted gold was aboard, and the necessary receipts were signed and delivered. Wendover paid no attention to the detail—he was establishing friendly relations with the ship's wireless operator, admitting himself something of a radio fan.

The *Berkeley Head* blew her siren; tugs moved into position to hel p her through the dock-gates; Blue Peter came down from her foremast head, to be replaced by the ensign of Brazil; and the voyage commenced, without a single cheer being raised from the lounging spectators, to whom the sailing of a casual freighter was an event of daily occurrence and of no special interest.

"Two million iron men, eh?" thought Soames. "And Alec'll get it, too—every last doubloon; he's that sort. I wonder how he'll manage it!" He had not been completely taken into his confederate's confidence; because Wendover knew that it is unwise to give too much away at any time. His own experience of human nature was that it could be got at—one way or another; and Soames was human. This ally had no initiative, but he could be relied on to follow another man's plans slavishly. Only—there was nothing to be gained by saying too much.

WITH the ship in open river, Captain Holyoake left the bridge in charge of the pilot and descended to that special bit of bridge-deck which was his own sacred promenade.

"I hope you'll enjoy your trip with us, Mr. Wendover," he said genially: a big, competent and affable man. "I was a bit too busy to give you a proper welcome when you came aboard. But now we're clear—like to see my cabin? I make it a point never to touch liquor so long as the engines are working; but there's no reason why you shouldn't."

Wendover accepted the invitation and entered the handsome apartment. Captain Holyoake unloaded his uniform pocket of a weighty automatic pistol, which he shut away in a drawer under his bunk.

"There wasn't any need for it, of course; but if anything had happened we'd have been asked what precautions we took, of course," he said. Wendover lifted incurious eyebrows.

"Expecting trouble with your crew?" There was the slightest suspicion of trepidation in his manner.

"God bless you, no, sir. The crew are all right; old-timers, making regular voyages, decent men, most of 'em married—not like your old-fashioned windjammer fly-by-nights. No, I'm not worried about the crew. But now we're clear of dock there isn't any harm in telling you that you're just about sitting on a very handsome fortune. Will you take soda with yours, Mr. Wendover?"

Over refreshments—himself abstemious—he went into details.

"I trust this business was kept a close secret," said Wendover. "With a freight like that—why, it's a direct invitation to wrong-doing. If I'd suspected for a moment—dear me!"

"What's likely to happen to it?" Holyoake wanted to know. He was confident of himself, confident of his ship; apt to consider his responsibility the lightest of loads.

"I suppose, when you come to think of it, nothing *is* likely to happen," said Wendover, with a suggestion of relief in his manner. "One gets into the way of imagining treasure as being carried about with pomp and circumstance, escorted by armed fleets, protected in a thousand different ways. Of course, in my seafaring days—not that they were anything to brag about—we never were entrusted with bullion. Warships conveyed it, so far as I remember."

"There aren't any pirates nowadays, sir; and we can look after ourselves here aboard the *Berkeley Head*," said Captain Holyoake, with a suggestion of patronage in his manner. "That specie will be delivered just as any ordinary parcel of cargo—"

"I trust so—indeed I trust so! But what a responsibility!" Mr. Wendover presently recovered from the flutter into which the news had thrown him, and talked engagingly about many things, until it was necessary for Captain Holyoake to return to his bridge. Wendover, after pacing the sacred section of deck for a while poked his head in at the door of the wireless cabin, where the operator was sending messages; received an invitation to enter and seat himself if he felt so inclined. But he contented himself with remaining on deck, occasionally pacing, occasionally overlooking the sendings. Presently he went down to his cabin, and superintended Soames, who, assisted by the steward, was unpacking. He behaved in every respect like an ordinary, interested passenger who found it difficult to settle down all at once in a strange environment. When the *Berkeley Head* stopped, and the pilot cutter sent her boat to rid the freighter of her pilot, Wendover watched the operation with lively interest. But when, the dinner bell ringing, he went below to his cabin to wash, he halted for a moment outside the door of that cabin which held the cases of specie, and smiled. His fingers crooked a little, almost like greedy talons; he sniffed, as though actually smelling the precious stuff, which he already counted his own property. Four hundred thousand pounds—negotiable, easy—and its safe winning meant an end to all his adventures. He was growing tired of the hazardous life of wrong-doing that had been his portion through many years; he longed for peace and respectability, for opportunity to reckon up his assets and gloat over his belongings.

AT DINNER he proved himself an agreeable companion, modest, not disposed to throw his weight about. There was small formality at table, where were present only the captain, two mates, the chief engineer and the wireless operator, together with Alexander Wendover. One mate kept the bridge; and Soames ate his meals in the pantry with the chief steward. The junior engineers were messed in their own quarters. Mr. Wendover remembered a humorous story or two which went down well, approved of the menu, and ate with appetite.

"Different from my young days at sea," he mentioned.

"Oh, there's really nothing to complain of in a seafaring life," laughed Holyoake, who, captainwise, monopolized the conversation at table. "What with wireless and one thing and another, it isn't like being at sea." He drank lime-juice and water a trifle despondently, as though his self-imposed vow of abstinence weighed heavily upon him. "Too much wireless, if you ask me anything," he mentioned. "We're never out of touch with owners for more than a couple of days at a stretch. They don't even leave the navigation in a man's hands nowadays—everything's run from the office as precisely as clockwork. Kills initiative. And if any sort of trouble happened, all we've got to do is to call up the nearest war-canoe by radio, and along it comes, *pronto*."

"Knocked all the romance and adventure out of it, eh?" Mr. Wendover smiled, and the shipmaster agreed.

"Not that there ever was very much," he added. "And my wife is as sick as blazes that I'm to be away from home for Christmas. I've been married sixteen years and I've never really had a Christmas at home—sailed on Christmas Eve last year—got home two days late the year before; never seem to have any luck."

"We must try to make it a day to be remembered, anyhow," suggested Wendover mildly. As it chanced, Christmas Day was the chosen day for his meditated coup. It suited his plans admirably. He might have been thinking along criminal lines when he next spoke, though his words were innocent enough.

"Would there be any objections to my asking the crew to drink my health, Captain Holyoake?" he asked. "As a newcomer—sort of feel it incumbent on me to pay my footing—"

"What? All of 'em? We carry a crew of thirty-five, you know; and if we didn't burn oil we'd be forty-five or more."

"Just a drink apiece, eh—three or four bottles should serve. I brought a few cases of stuff with me; and if you've no objection—" Captain Holyoake having no objection, Soames was summoned. He first supplied a bottle of whisky to the captain's table; and Holyoake resisted temptation only with a struggle.

"I'll ring down to stop her a while, Cap'n," volunteered the chief engineer amiably; "then you can take your tot without breaking your principles. It's only so long as the engines are working the pledge holds."

"No—mustn't play fast and loose with good intentions; but you shall stop them for a minute on Christmas Day, if you're so minded," Holyoake laughed. The rest of the company at table pledged Mr. Wendover solemnly in excellent liquor. A bottle was split between the engineers' mess and the petty officers; a bottle went into each forecastle; good relations were immediately established; and Alexander Wendover was voted the best of good company. The opinion was expressed that it would make for general happiness if more like-minded passengers were carried on the Head Line. Captain Holyoake invited him to his cabin at the close of the little celebration, and showed him photographs of his wife and family, before he coiled down on his settee for the sailor's afternoon nap. Wendover went down to his own room.

"WELL, we're properly started now," he said to Soames. "You've not been liquoring, have you?"

"Not to speak of; but when the steward asked me I couldn't very well refuse, could I?"

"You've got to keep your head clear for Christmas Day, laddie; don't let's have any sort of fool tricks, eh? When a man's had a drink he's liable to blat a bit about things he shouldn't."

"You took one yourself—I saw you."

"I can carry it. Don't worry; but let's remember a thing or two." Soames flushed a little at that. Drink occasionally drove him into tigerish moods, when caution went by the board. Normally he kept sober and level-headed; but there had been exceptions, bitterly repented, when minor coups had become precarious, only rendered successful by Wendover's ruthless determination. For the little quiet man could become a tiger of fury when his own interests dictated such a course. He was quite capable of shooting up the entire ship's company of the *Berkeley* in furtherance of his objective if necessary.

"You won't have any need to worry about me when the time comes," Soames protested.

"Let's hope not." The faintest hint of a wolfish snarl showed. Soames would be relentlessly thrown into the discard if occasion demanded. Wendover wanted that load of specie, and he didn't care if it meant wading through blood to get it. He had chosen Soames as his ally because he believed he knew the man and could trust him. Expedience required Soames to serve faithfully; a word from Wendover would suffice to put him behind the bars preliminary to a trip to the scaffold. Not that it was fear alone that bred loyalty: Wendover had done little acts of kindness on his lieutenant's behalf; and these were gratefully remembered.

"When you want me you'll find me ready," said Soames; "though you haven't told me a whole heap about the scheme."

"Nor don't intend to yet awhile; it's early days; and for all we know some one might have his ear glued to a knothole in any one of these bulkheads." They were speaking very quietly, as before, almost inaudibly; eyes serving more than ears. They continued the arranging of the cabin. Half a dozen cases of whisky were among the baggage; and two of the unopened boxes were left untouched. They were distinguished by a trifling mark which indicated to Soames and Wendover that their contents were other than they affected to be.

WHEN arrangements were made to their joint satisfaction, Wendover went out on deck, Soames dropped on the settee and was swiftly asleep. Outside there wasn't a great deal of interest; the *Berkeley Head* trudged at an even ten knots through a gray sea, sparsely sprinkled with ships, homeward and outward bound. Wendover made a seemingly casual but actually comprehensive survey of the freighter. She carried all her boats in davits on the bridge-deck, four life-boats and two ordinary boats—a gig and a pinnace. The life-boats were sizeable craft, he saw, completely equipped with biscuit-tins, water barricoes, axes, oars and sails, together with signaling gear.

"A man could go clean round the world in one of those," Wendover thought. He leaned over the gunwale of a boat and scrutinized its interior—plenty of room there for the stowage of four tons of gold. It sounded a lot, but actually it bulked small. There were eighty boxes; and two active men, working all-out, could transfer those eighty packages from the specie-room to the life-boat in forty minutes at the outside. Given an uninterrupted hour the whole thing was a cinch—a picnic. He gloatingly imagined the eighty cases stacked in the well of the boat—his own property—a fortune, enough to permit him to snap careless fingers at fate. The itch in his soul increased. The requisite wait before getting into action threatened to become tedious. He began to wish he had made other arrangements; and yet there was nothing to be gained by too much precipitancy. He mentally possessed the specie as his own property—it was as much his even now as any one else's. He chuckled under his breath at thought of the big simplicity of the entire scheme. His experience went to show that the big coups were generally performed by a wise simplicity—which was the hall-mark of genius.

"Like robbing a blind beggar without any legs," he mused. And continued to gloat over his potential fortune.

AN HOUR after dawn next morning, the *Berkeley Head* stopped her engines in obedience to a signal of distress from a small, almost foundered motor launch, lying a speck there in wide wastes of water. By dint of clever maneuvering, the mate took the big ship down closely alongside the hapless craft, and hailed.

"Can you take us on board?" he was asked. "Engines broken down—we've been adrift three days; you're the first to see our signals."

Captain Holyoake was out on deck the moment the engine-room telegraph rang.

He would have slept undisturbed through a tornado; but anything out of the common found him keenly alert.

"Want to abandon?" he asked the refugees—two men. "We can't reckon to pick up your boat, you know."

"Never want to see the damn' death-trap again," said the principal, his teeth chattering. "She can go to blazes for all I care!"

"Look out for our rope, then! Get the ladder along, Mr. Johnson." The refugees were brought aboard and regaled with piping hot coffee. They were drenched and forlorn; and had a pitiful tale to tell, when recovered. They had set off for an ordinary cruise, with a day's provisions aboard, intending to return by dark; but engine troubles had increased until a complete breakdown resulted. They had done their best, but during one night the sea-currents had carried them out of the usual track of shipping as well as out of sight of land. The somewhat flimsily built boat had suffered—they thought it must have hit some wreckage; for it began to leak alarmingly.

"We were just about all in when you sighted us," said the spokesman of the two gratefully. "Where're you bound?"

"Pernambuco, first," said Holyoake.

"Once we get in touch with civilization we can pay our passages," said the rescued men. The abandoned launch still hung alongside at the end of the rope; she was nearly awash, useless. With her owner's sanction, Holyoake had firebars dropped into her from the height of the bridge-deck; the bars burst through the frail planking; and when the rope was cut, the launch sank among bubbles.

"She won't contribute any danger to navigation," said Holyoake. "You people had better get a hot bath apiece while your things are drying." They were very grateful; and still more grateful when Wendover, who had appeared from his cabin, offered a change of clothing to the castaways.

"I was once mixed up in a deal much like this one," he mentioned, in making the offer. "A fellow-feeling, eh?" The little man gave no hint of recognition; neither by word nor look did he suggest that the whole scheme was cunningly prearranged by himself. He had been a sailor; and he knew to within a mile or two exactly where the *Berkeley Head* would be at a given hour of any day. As a careful general plans his campaign, so had Wendover planned his coup, leaving nothing to chance. Four passengers might have been refused by the Head Line; two castaways could not be ignored.

CAPTAIN HOLYOAKE wasn't such a fool as Wendover considered him. With his salvage turned over to the ministrations of the steward, and extra quantities of breakfast in course of preparation, he held conference with Johnson.

"It might just be accident," he said; "but then, again, it might not. We've got to remember that we're carrying four tons of specie this trip; and we'd be dashed fools to take unnecessary chances."

"Two men with nothing but the clothes they're wearing, and those drenched!" scoffed the mate.

"Two men—strangers! Not that I'm going to waste time by putting into port and landing them; but—just you signal the first homeward-bounder and tell him we're sending a couple of castaways for passage home."

"Ay, ay, sir." Johnson thought the old man was making an unnecessary fuss about nothing in particular; but his duty was to obey. Not for long, though—Mr. Wendover had already promised to pull such strings as were necessary to secure for the *Berkeley Head's* mate an early command in a line of equal repute with the Head Line—ships making short voyages such as would be convenient for a newly married man.

"We'll run no unnecessary risks. We know nothing about these fellows, and it mightn't just be accident that brought them athwart our hawse. See to it."

Mr. Wendover was at breakfast when the engine-room telegraph rang; he looked inquiringly at Holyoake. The two castaways, clean and dry, also turned their gaze to the captain's face. They were to all seeming of the caste that eats at the captain's table; and they had given a racy account of their experiences during the meal.

"You gentlemen won't be required to make a trip to Brazil, after all," grinned Holyoake. "If you've finished breakfast, we might as well get on deck." One of the castaways looked momentarily at Wendover, as if expecting a signal; but the little man gave none. If he was nonplussed his manner indicated no perturbation whatsoever; for circumstances had made him an excellent actor; and it is quite on the cards that had his mentality been switched along righteous channels, he might have made something of a name for himself—probably as a successful financier.

"You're welcome to those clothes," was all Wendover said. They went on deck; to discover a big intermediate boat near at hand, with varicolored bunting at her signal-span. The stranger was an obliging ship, perfectly willing to return the unfortunate castaways to civilization; and, knowing the usual difficulty of getting away a freighter's boat, she offered to send across her own motor-launch; an offer that was accepted. The castaways went down the Jacob's ladder when the launch arrived, with brief farewells; Wendover, his face impassive, watched them go, answered the waves of their hands as the *Berkeley Head* rang to full speed ahead.

"Well, that seems to have torn it a bit," said Soames, when opportunity offered.

"On second thoughts, it's perhaps just as well," Wendover returned. "Four might have been an unwieldy number; it just means that it's up to us two to pull this thing off. All the more credit to us if we do; and I don't see any particular reason why we shouldn't. Yes, maybe it's just as well—and I told Smart and Elkington what to do in case things didn't shape out just so."

"I reckon you don't overlook many of the details," approved Soames admiringly.

"It's strict attention to small detail that makes for success," said Wendover, a little pompously. "Many a man falls down just because he thinks the little things are negligible: he sees the big outlines; but to see every loophole and plug it—ah! that's genius. I thought we might manage to get those two to help us; but I also saw the gag mightn't work."

"You've done quite a deal of planning, one way and another, haven't you?" asked Soames.

"It's worth it; many a man's planned for five years without expecting a tenth of the profit we're going to make. I must remember to compliment Smart and Elkington when there's a chance, though—they worked the trick very neatly; oh, yes, very neatly. And they won't be wasting their time, anyway, they know how to get on with the Mayfair job."

"All the same, they'd have been handy here," said Soames, with a hint of a grumble. "Two aren't many against thirty-five. And holding up a ship like this might prove a chancey sort of job."

"Not the way I've planned it," responded Wendover. "I've taken every last little thing into consideration; haven't allowed a loophole. Christmas day finds the ship within seventy-five miles of Pavlo Rocks, eh? That's about as certain as that the sun will rise about eight o'clock on Christmas morning, barring accidents; and anyhow, even if there's an accident, it doesn't matter overmuch. Brynweth'll be waiting at Pavlo Rocks in the *Tomtit*, eh? It might have been better if we'd arranged for him to meet us at sea; but I don't think so. If he'd been hanging about, supposing engine-room trouble had delayed us, folks might have got suspicious and taken extra precautions, and that would have scotched us aboard here. We're the people who really matter; and I reckon I've planned this thing out so that it's as nearly fool-proof as any plan could be. I'm already so well in with the bridge crowd that I'm allowed into the chart-room any time I like. You can take this from me, Johnny—when your Uncle Alec tackles a job he tackles it."

CAPTAIN HOLYOAKE grinned affably when Wendover joined him in his after-breakfast promenade on the reserved deck.

"I expect I was a fool to worry about those castaways," he said; "but when all is said and done, it's my job to take no risks; and you can't get away from the fact that a few tons of specie is pretty tempting bait."

"I don't exactly see what those chaps could have done," said Wendover; "but I expect they'll be glad to be homeward-bound rather than heading for Brazil."

"I'll just nip down and take a look at that specie," said Holyoake. "Care to see close on half a million in bulk?"

"It would certainly be a novel experience," laughed Alexander Wendover. "We ordinary people so seldom see real money. What with checks and what-not, the idea of money seems vague."

"Come along down and sit on the pile for a minute or two; be a vicarious American millionaire!" Holyoake got the keys and descended, leading the way. The cabin allotted to the specie was at the end of a short alleyway, remote from the rest of the living accommodation. "The room set aside for a hospital, in case any of the officers go sick," Holyoake explained, as he unlocked the door. The only extra precaution taken with the precious stuff had been to fit a stout iron batten across the door, with a staple and padlock. The specie-cases were neatly stacked on the cabin-floor, all eighty of them; compact, solid-seeming packages. The single port-hole, which was not large enough to permit the exit of an unbroken case, had been screened by the steel shutter, and it was necessary to switch on the roof-light.

"LOOKS harmless enough, doesn't it?" said the captain, seating himself on the pile "More than some of us earn in a week, though—a year's interest at only five per cent. would just about set me up for life. Sit down, sir, and see what it feels like to be rich. This money is as much ours ; as any one else's while it's here." He went on to voice his ambitions, which were to earn sufficient surplus to buy a farm remotely inland, far from all sight of blue water, and there settle peacefully, never again to think of a ship.

Wendover, seating himself, caressed the nearest cases with a lovingly, lingering touch; and the itch of his soul increased. He visualized his own disposal of this specie. When all was said and done what he wanted for himself differed but little from Holyoake's ambitions. The sailor wanted peaceful retirement; so did the master-crook. The only difference between them was that the skipper's dreams were unlikely to be fulfilled while Wendover's were more than likely—they were certain. Because he'd arranged the thing so that it was absolutely fool-proof, leaving practically nothing to chance. Even the remoter contingencies had been foreseen and guarded against.

"I suppose there'd be no chance of any one getting at this stuff," he mentioned casually, still smoothing the solid cases with fingers that involuntarily crooked into the semblance of talons. Gold-hunger troubled him—he had a moment's mad desire to fell the skipper, to break open the cases, to plunge his hands in among the seductive bullion. He would have liked to pour double handfuls of the chinking stuff over his head and shoulders. He would have liked to pile the whole treasure into a single heap and wallow in it—the thought of the gold fevered him. Two million dollars was *money*.

"Well, ask yourself, what chance would any one have, Mr. Wendover. You can't cart four tons of stuff about like it was a sack of shavings, can you now? Suppose that some of the crew did take a fancy to this little lot—well, it would have to stop at a fancy. Those cases are sealed with the bank's seal. Let's look them over, just to make sure the seals are unbroken." They did this, satisfying themselves that everything was intact. "Before we reach port these seals will be examined again; and if there's the slightest suspicion of tampering, there'll be trouble. A man can't dive overboard and swim ashore with a load of gold, can he? No man'll be allowed to leave this ship until she's been searched from end to end. There are steel bulkheads on each side of this cabin; and there's only one set of keys; that I hold. Besides that, there's an electric bell that rings in my cabin if any one begins tampering with this room. A rat couldn't cross this floor without alarming me. The weight and bulk are our biggest safeguard, though; and the fact that only a very few people, and those trustworthy, know that we've got anything aboard out of the ordinary."

"Well, it doesn't make a man feel any different to know that he's been a millionaire for a minute," laughed Wendover. "But when you've landed this stuff safely and got your receipt, you shall have as fine a drink as I can buy you—so long as your engines aren't working!"

CHRISTMAS Day broke in no wise different from any ordinary day, except that the air was suggestive of seasonable feasting. Compliments were exchanged at the breakfast table, and each officer found at his plate a box of first-rate cigars: a gift from Mr. Wendover. The ship was in open water and fine weather—a steady and fairly fresh breeze was blowing. Wendover had noticed this when he wakened at six o'clock, and had commented on the fact to Soames.

"I'm not a praying man, as you know," he said, over the morning tea the steward's boy had brought to the cabin; "but I did hope there'd be a good breeze today; it simplifies things a lot. That was just the one contingency a man couldn't prepare against; but the luck's running our way, Johnny. Everything's absolutely foolproof now. Take your time from me, and don't try any private breaks, that's all I ask."

"I know when to follow," said Soames admiringly.

It was arranged that dinner that day should be postponed until six o'clock, instead of the usual noontime hour, when a freighter's principal meal is customarily served. The day passed pleasantly enough, without anything approaching excitement. Captain Holyoake had not the smallest objection to his principal passenger donating a bottle or two of whisky to the forecastle hands; indeed, he rather welcomed the suggestion, as it would conserve his own limited store of intoxicants. The shipowners, apt to be parsimonious in details, had overlooked the possibility of Christmas Day being spent at sea; the men expected a drink, and consequently Holyoake would be looked to to supply the rejoicing fluid.

Soames took the liquor to the forecastles—he was already on excellent terms with the foremast hands. He spent most of his evenings, when Wendover was playing unlimited games of crib with the captain, in gambling with dice in the forecastles where his luck was always indifferent. He paid prompt cash to liquidate his losses and not infrequently smuggled a bottle of whisky forward to lend exhilaration to the proceedings. He stipulated that no mention of these clandestine potations should be permitted to stray to the cabin. And the men, scenting further indulgences, took precautions. On this particular day Soames openly carried two bottles of whisky forward, one in either hand. Captain Holyoake watched him go, and smiled in satisfaction when a round of cheering sounded from the sailors' quarters.

"The men'll be sorry when you leave us, sir," he said to Wendover, who was beside him, leaning over the scrubbed rail of the promenade deck.

"I think you ought to send a radio message to your wife, wishing her the compliments of the season," said Wendover.

"You seem to think of everything." Captain Holyoake puffed appreciatively at the big cigar taken from his own special box—of better quality even than the cigars given to the officers. "But my wife would cry out against the extravagance."

"Let me foot the bill—call it a Christmas present to your wife. I like to keep up the old-fashioned Christmas spirit."

"Well, now, that's generous of you, Mr. Wendover; you have an aptitude for making folks happy. My wife'll be tickled to death when she gets that message." He strolled away toward the wireless house to despatch it.

SOAMES went into the seamen's forecastle. "Mr. Wendover's compliments and best wishes for a happy Christmas," he said, depositing the bottle on the table. "The captain reckoned one bottle'd be enough." He winked solemnly, and from an inner pocket produced a second bottle. "Mr. Wendover reckoned the captain hardly knew what he was talking about," he added. "This is a bottle of the very best; but it might be safer to keep it until night—just in case." And he handed the second bottle over.

"Right y'are," said the senior seaman jovially. "A wink's as good as a nod to a blind hoss! But you don't leave this fo'csle not without you sample your own poison, Mr. Soames." And Soames drank a measure of the whisky from a tin pannikin, departing amid cheers. He repeated his performance in the firemen's quarters, where were the stokehold crew that were not actually on duty. Here he indulged in another tot, although his instincts warned him against such indulgence; still, it was Christmas Day, and he believed his head was strong enough to carry the load, especially considering how extremely abstemious he had been latterly. None the less, at the price of a tot, he secured from the chief steward a handful of cloves when he returned to the cabin; for he had no wish to arouse Wendover's indignation. Wendover himself was keeping rigidly abstemious so long as the great coup was pending; after it was successfully completed would be time enough for indulgence.

The day continued fine throughout; a day of bright sunshine and crisp seas, licked to whiteness by the gay, invigorating breeze that blew. At noon Wendover as usual joined the knot of officers on the bridge, where they were busily taking altitudes;

and he was in the chart-room when Captain Holyoake laid off the *Berkeley Head's* position on the big chart of the North Atlantic.

"How's she doing?" he asked interestedly; and only he himself knew the excitement that tingled within him.

"As well as can be expected," laughed Holyoake, running a circle round the pencil dot indicative of the position, and writing: "Xmas Day" alongside the ring. "She's logged a fair ten and a half through the twenty-four hours." Wendover took keen interest in this daily navigation. He pored over the chart for quite a while chatting casually. His eyes were very busy. He realized that his previous calculations were so nearly correct as to make no difference. At midnight the *Berkeley Head* would be exactly seventy-five miles from the northernmost point of Pavlo Rocks, which would then be bearing about S. S. E. The wind was northeast; a perfectly fair wind; and even a laden life-boat would log a fair six knots per hour to its urge. By daylight the abandoning life-boat would be thirty-six miles distant from the *Berkeley Head;* out of sight. The *Tomtit*, specially chartered for the purpose, was lying snugly hidden in a weatherproof cove under the northernmost point of Pavlo Rocks; and the *Tomtit* was a powerful motor yacht, capable of keeping the seas for an almost indefinite period. Oh yes, the whole scheme was absolutely fool-proof, you couldn't get away from facts. Exactly as a company-promoter invests his capital in a gamble with rich promise of gain, so had Wendover invested the savings of precarious years in equipping the expedition for the looting of the *Berkeley Head*.

He felt infinitely more confident of success than does the average financier for he had given fully as much thought to his coup as a great general would give to the winning of a campaign.

MIDNIGHT, consequently, was the appointed time for effecting the deal. He promised himself a Christmas present of gratifying proportions: four tons of gold. He laughed quietly to himself as he reflected how easy it all promised to be. Talk about pirates! Teach and Morgan together had probably never made such a killing, notwithstanding all their expensive outfits and lashings of men, as he and Soames would make. He bubbled over with merriment during the midday meal; and challenged Holyoake to cribbage after tea. There was an atmosphere of complacent idleness about the ship, for, on account of the holiday, no work save what was absolutely necessary was done. And unlike a sailing-ship, a steamer's work is limited; most of it being merely designed for filling in time. The men for'ard washed their clothes, pipe in mouth. After tea there was a burst of unmusical carol-singing from the forecastles; and the wireless operator set his gramophone going.

"There's one certain thing about it," Wendover said at evening dinner; "you are all going to drink to Christmas in a glass of port that hasn't anything at all the matter with it. Even you, Captain Holyoake; although you've been so nicely abstemious all day."

"Some one's got to keep a clear head when free drinks are going about," the skipper laughed. "But seeing what day it is, a glass of port won't do any one any harm, I'm sure."

"In that case, I'll get it—in case Soames makes a mistake," Wendover said. He rose from the table and went to his cabin. Returning to the saloon he passed the engineers' mess-room, halted there.

"You won't object to a bottle of port, I hope," he said; and passed over two bottles. The second engineer, senior member of the mess, thanked him profusely; invited him in to share it.

"Sorry—but I'll tell you what—don't turn in for a bit; and I'll slip along for a yarn, when they've finished in the cabin, eh? It might be possible to find even another bottle; engineering must be dry work in this sort of weather."

"You've got it there; and it's a pity these Head boats are run on teetotal lines," the second engineer said. "The owners seem to think we weren't given mouths when we were born, at all. You'll be very welcome, Mr. Wendover, any time you care to look in."

"Thanks, Mr. Mackenzie. And one of these days, if you've no objection, I'd like well enough to look over the job below—if passengers are allowed down there, that is."

"Any time you like, sir—any time. Just slip down whenever you feel inclined; open house, you know."

WENDOVER conveyed two bottles of port to the saloon, and claimed the right to decant it himself. It was excellent fruity wine, of a kind to suit a sailor's palate, for sailors are seldom connoisseurs of liquor. There were walnuts and the usual Christmas delicacies to follow the good dinner the chief steward had provided—frozen turkey and such seasonable luxuries as must be eaten on that day of all days. The mate reluctantly rose to relieve his junior; mentioned what a pity it was that he must go. The third mate descended and ate his meal, laughed at the merry play of Alexander Wendover's wit.

Wendover was at top form that evening. He had an inexhaustible fund of stories, which presently broadened. The wine circulated freely; and it is doubtful if any one noticed that Soames had supplemented the original two bottles with two more, whose corks were withdrawn when he brought them to table. An almost imperceptible glance was exchanged between Wendover and his aide on this occasion, and Wendover smiled quietly. Everything was working out exactly according to program. The ultimate bottles of port contained a special drug of the delay action variety—knockout drops in a modified form. For certain of the packages in Wendover's cabin were not what they seemed; he had come equipped in every detail. Having served the fresh supply of wine Soames excused himself from the pantry, where the domestic staff had assuredly not been forgotten and went on deck. Straight to the captain's cabin he went, moving silently on rubber-shod feet. By way of precaution, in case any one should surprise him, he carried another bottle of port, prepared to explain his presence on the excuse that a surreptitious drink was being placed ready to the captain's hand by Wendover's generosity.

He gained the cabin without adventure, however. The mate, slightly somnolent from much food and drink, leaned over the bridge-rails peering ahead, and dreaming of the girl who was shortly to become his wife; thanks to Wendover's generous promises. Soames slipped like a shadow into the room; switched out the lights after a quick survey, and moved like a stealthy ghost toward the chest of drawers. Wendover had given him explicit instructions. Two days before he had challenged Holyoake to a pistol shooting competition—deploring the fact that he personally carried no firearms. He knew exactly where Holyoake had deposited his automatic after the sport—in which Wendover had proved himself to be an execrable shot. Soames opened the unlocked drawer, examined the automatic by the light of a small pencil torch; emptied the magazine, decanted the shell out of the chamber; restored the weapon to its former position. A quick but thorough search satisfied him that there were no other firearms in the room; and the broken box of cartridges in the same drawer as the pistol, was collected and carried away—to be thrown overboard.

THEY were still at table when he returned to the saloon; and they remained there when the mate descended at eight bells; he joined the convivial party, reporting that it was a perfectly fine night, as clear as a bell of brass; and nothing whatever in sight beyond sea and sky. The wireless operator, by no means intoxicated, but mellowed and made happy by wine, commenced to sing a sentimental song in a light, tuneful tenor—the rest joined rapturously in the chorus. Captain Holyoake beat time on the nutshell littered cloth with a fruit knife. Two bells sounded on the bridge-bell; the voice of the forecastle lookout sounded clearly:

"The lights are bright and all's well, sir!"

"All's very well," agreed Holyoake, looking longingly at the fresh bottle of port that Soames placed at his elbow. Then he trolled in a deep baritone: "The sea ran high and the bark rode well!" When captains sing, subordinates respectfully listen; but the effort of carolling apparently parched Holyoake's throat; for he did not say nay when Wendover coaxingly refilled his glass.

"Never a Christmas at home, in all these years!" he said plaintively through wet lips. That made him garrulously reminiscent; meantime the mate made up for recent abstentions. The second mate, muttering that if he didn't get a nap now he wouldn't be fit to turn out for the midnight watch, rose and left the saloon. Entering his cabin the first object on which his eyes rested was an uncorked bottle of whisky.

"With A. Wendover's Christmas wishes," was written on the label.

"Some sort of a passenger!" said the second mate, and drank, more copiously than he intended, perhaps; but his hand shook.

"Well, how about a game of crib?" asked Wendover brightly.

"Suits me," said the captain: "eheu—I feel a bit sleepy. A bit of a fisherman's walk first, eh? Just to blow the cobwebs away. Then we can settle down for a night of it if you feel that way." Wendover followed him out on deck, leaving the mate and the wireless operator with the chief engineer at table. The chief steward spoke in the mate's ear:

"The old man won't be coming back, will he, sir?"

"Hardly likely—why?"

"Well, Soames here, sir—he says that Mr. Wendover doesn't want to offend the captain; but if you gentlemen feel like another decent drink, you've only to say so."

"Mr. Wendover, steward, is a gentleman of the first water; and I don't mind who hears me say it. What about it, Chief—free pump promised?"

"Bring her along," said the chief engineer spaciously. He would have made intimate friends with his bitterest enemy in his present mood. It was only human nature to invite the chief steward to partake, too—and even Soames; though Soames had seen to it that the pantry-staff had lacked nothing in the way of seasonable comforts. And when they were thoroughly settled to the discussion of this ultimate bottle of whisky, Soames slipped forward. He was acting according to program, with the beautiful precision of a well-oiled machine. No creator, the man was a perfect actor and interpreter—with a photographic memory. Wendover had told him exactly what to do, and he did it.

"Mr. Wendover thinks it'll be all right now it's night," he told them in the forecastle, offering liquid largesse. He was rapturously received; but his welcomers insisted that he should share their potations. They were in no wise suspicious, merely convivial in the way of deep-water men, who are generally childlike and unsophisticated in their dealings with their kind. Soames drank out of the innocent bottle, not the doped one. He knew that he oughtn't to do it; but a half-forgotten thirst recreated itself inside him; and the kiss of the fiery stuff instead of slaking it, only aggravated the craving. The second tot made him indifferent to consequences—he felt that he could with safety go on drinking all night. But a little wave of fear troubled him, too—fear of a Wendover whom the people of the *Berkeley Head* did not know: a livid fury of a man who would kill as quickly as he would speak, if matters did not go entirely to his liking. So when the third tot was served out he waived his share—reluctantly; and left the doped bottle behind him when he quitted the forecastle.

IN THE firemen's quarters he behaved with exemplary rectitude; merely touching his lips to the proffered liquor; he behaved similarly in the petty officers' mess and was perfectly sober—according to his own fancy—when he returned aft. He found the saloon still occupied, the chief steward had joined the festive party, and it appeared as if they were going to make a night of it. Soames went up to the boat-deck, where the cool wind caused by the freighter's vigorous passage, fanned his temples; he inhaled gratefully, gazing at the inky blackness of the sea, slit across only by the hurrying white-caps which were hardly visible. Then he knocked on the door of the captain's cabin, and on being bidden entered:

"Will you require anything else tonight sir?" he asked, as he had asked every evening since the passage commenced. He saw that Wendover was seated opposite Holyoake at a card-table. There were glasses on the table; Holyoake was smoking a very large cigar, which Soames identified. The captain was sleepy; he seemed unable to concentrate on the game—he removed the cigar and yawned widely.

"No; you may turn in, Soames," said Wendover. "I've got twenty-four, Holyoake."

He looked at the clock—it was on the stroke of ten. "I fancy I'll turn in, myself," he said. "Hello—there's still a drop in the bottle, skipper, going to finish it?" He poured out two glassfuls, pushed one against Holyoake's hand. As the captain raised his glass Wendover's sleeve caught his own and capsized it.

"Tut-tut! that's a pity—never mind; I'll give myself a night-cap when I go below."

"Here's how!" yawned Holyoake, and drained his glass. At that moment Wendover swung a loaded section of gas-piping from his sleeve and hit Holyoake fairly on the temple. It was a neat and timely blow. Holyoake dropped asprawl across the table without so much as a whimper.

"The poor gentleman, having drunk too much Christmas alcohol, was considerately put to bed by the passenger," said Wendover. "Lend a hand here, Soames—the show is about to start!"

NOW that the definite issue was joined the two crooks worked with beautiful precision. They had rehearsed the operations in gross and detail several times. The stertorously snoring Holyoake was swung from the table into the cabin reserved for his sleeping; he was undressed and attired in his pajamas. Under the bedclothes Soames, an expert, linked the unconscious man's thumbs together with a fragment of fishing-line—infinitely less cumbersome than cord about the wrists and even more effective. A length of fishing-line went about his ankles, too; and a handkerchief was stuffed into his mouth and fastened there. The face was then turned away to the bulkhead and the coverlet drawn over poor Holyoake's head. If he had resisted in the smallest degree Wendover was quite prepared to destroy him out of hand. He was no longer the suave passenger—his lips were drawn back a little from his yellow teeth, and he looked vulpine and destructive. When he spoke it was in curt monosyllables, not one of them unnecessary. Soames, in action, obeyed like a perfect automaton.

Wendover possessed himself of the keys of the specie-cabin. The door of the captain's bedroom he locked, removed the key and threw it overboard.

"Now, then!" he said. "Crew all right for'ard!"

"Drinking freely—of the doped stuff."

"Nip for'ard and shut those storm-doors, clamp 'em fast. Batten down the skylights when that's done; though that dope will keep 'em quite quiet for a long time. Leave nothing to chance, though. See to it." He might almost as easily have poisoned all hands; but he was shrewd enough to know that while a robbery would arouse interest in crime-hunting circles, a wholesale killing would serve to put half civilization on his track. Too, he did not approve of unnecessary killing. He had been required to destroy life ere this; but always he did it reluctantly. For two reasons—killing was inartistic; also, the remembrance of the killed sometimes caused unpleasant apprehensions in the element he called his immortal soul.

As Soames went along the foredeck Wendover climbed to the navigating bridge. He often did that, for a yarn with the watchkeeper, who welcomed a relief from the eternal monotony of staring into a void. Wendover was laughing quietly when young Wilson, the third mate, recognized his approach.

"Far be it from me to spread scandal," said Wendover; "but between you and me and the binnacle, the old man's looked too long on the rosy wine."

"Mean he's got a skinful, sir?"

"Oh; nothing to notice; no, no—but he's sleepy; and he's turned in. He gave a pretty plain hint that he wouldn't be pleased with any one who disturbed him for anything less than a tornado or a collision."

"He needn't worry about me. The way I'm feeling now, I'm anxious not to have him butting in—I might say things I'd be sorry for. This has been *some* Christmas, if you ask me anything."

"If you feel you've got a cordite mouth, there's nothing like a hair of the dog that bit you for squaring things up," Wendover said, and shook a flask that gurgled pleasantly. "This is the stuff to straighten you—and yet—I'm not so sure. The ship's in your charge—"

"Oh, I'm not squiffy, if that's what you mean," said Wilson. "I've never slept on watch yet; and I don't intend to start, not even on Christmas night."

"Well, perhaps a swig wouldn't harm you; as a matter of fact it'll do you good; but don't for Heaven's sake say that I gave it you, or I'll be getting into the old man's black books." He twisted the bayonet stopper of the flask and trickled a measure into the cup. Wilson swallowed appreciatively.

"Jinks, that's good stuff!" he said. "I can feel it warming my toes." Wendover remained beside him for a little while, talking of strange and fictitious Christmases that he himself had spent; and Wilson leaned more sluggishly against the bridge-rails. Once Wendover heard a ghostly snore. He clucked dryly; muttered:

"Talk about not sleeping on watch to your grandmother, youngster!" and went quietly from the bridge. He made no hasty fuss about his movements; everything was exquisitely coordinated. Outside the captain's door he halted, listening. He was able to hear Soames close the storm-proof doors that made a prison of the forward accommodation; and he thought to see his aide working at the forecastle skylights almost immediately afterward.

WENDOVER went below. A glance into the saloon showed him that all four occupants were either fast asleep or very drowsy. There was nothing to arouse suspicion in this in the mind of a chance-comer: these were merely men who had slightly over-indulged in unfamiliar alcohol: a pardonable happening on Christmas night surely; and all were off-duty in any case. Drinking might be reprehensible, but so far as it does not interefere with the performance of duty it is not in any way criminal. The merrymakers would doubtless have sore heads in the morning; but that was their own affair.

Wendover walked toward his cabin, passing the engineers' mess-room en route. Some of the juniors were still there, more or less sleepy. Wendover saluted them, and on being invited to enter the room, insisted that he should pay his footing in so doing; and, returning from his cabin, brought more liquor, which he pressed on the mechanics, though without undue insistence. Pleading his own sleepiness he soon retired; and in his cabin found Soames.

"The ship's pretty nearly ours to do what we like with," he mentioned. "Time to get properly busy now. Bear a hand, Johnny!"

Soames opened a case on the floor and took therefrom a couple of heavy automatic pistols, both fully loaded. One he pocketed, the other he passed to Wendover; as he did so, the chief crook looked at him suspiciously.

"You've been liquoring, you hoodoo!" Wendover snapped.

"Aw—nothing to make a fuss over, Boss! I reckon I know the size of load I can carry—you don't catch me overshooting the mark on a job of this size."

"If anything goes wrong through your fault, I'll scrag you—hear that?" said Wendover, with the hint of a snarl. "I've made this stunt fool-proof; but if you butt in and queer the pitch—God help your soul; because you'll need all He can do for you!" He balanced the automatic as he spoke, and drew his brows together, his glance fixed on Soames' chest. He was keyed up now to a pitch where he would have shot his aide dead without an instant's compunction, but he needed him; he had many uses for him before the *Tomtit* was reached.

"Booze-hound!" he muttered. "You damned fool!" Soames shivered, with mingled fear and indignation. He dare not admit that, feeling the thirst upon him, he had helped himself liberally to the private store of whisky; because when he had over-indulged he sometimes acted impetuously, doing things for which he was sorry afterward: silly, impulsive things without rhyme or reason. Once, when in that condition, he had actually walked up to a policeman and invited him to fight!

"If you feel I've queered anything, you can do what you like to me," he gulped.

"Well, you'll touch no drop now till this job's done, see?" Soames mumbled understanding, and by way of atonement showed an eagerness to get to the real work.

"How d' we stand now?" said Wendover quickly. He tapped off the points on his finger-tips with the muzzle of his automatic. "Captain's settled, so's Wilson; he won't waken for a full day, since he got the stuff almost neat out of my flask. The crowd in the saloon are blotto—we can fix them off presently. Both fo'c'sles attended to? Any one short when you left?"

"Man at the wheel and the lookout from the sailors' side. I dropped the lookout when he wanted to know what I was doing at the skylight; he's got his."

"Killed him?"

"Shouldn't be surprised." Soames spoke callously. He had no rooted objection to killing when necessary; and he wouldn't have minded overly if Wendover had shot up the entire ship's company.

"We'll tackle the man at the wheel presently. God bless these short-handed freighters! Stokehold side?"

"One fireman, one greaser on duty—rest under hatches and safe—as drunk as lords. And they can't get clear, short of dynamite, anyway. Those storm-doors are the best ever—sheet steel."

"They're built to keep out the wintry North Atlantic," barked Wendover. "The shipbuilders are our best pals. Who else? The engineers? They'll be all right. And the junior stewards—there's the cook, too—"

"Cookey went under half an hour after dinner—wanted to fight the chief steward over a girl in Rio, or something of the sort. The steward put him to sleep all right, all right—I helped carry him to his bunk. He won't trouble any one."

"Best make sure, though. Then there's really only three men on duty down below—*and* the helmsman? Come up and attend to him for a start."

THEY went on deck moving through alleyways that were silent, save for occasional choking snores. Wendover drew to the door of the engineers' mess and the saloon door also. He whispered an instruction to Soames as he set his foot on the ladder of the navigating bridge, and Soames grunted.

"By the way, Wilson," said Wendover crisply, walking across the bridge. Soames was almost on his heels, but the aide paused by the door of the wheelhouse. The helmsman looked up—he was in a drowsy condition anyhow—and saw Soames' face revealed by the glow of the lamp in the binnacle hood.

"What'n hell—!" he began. For he saw something in that face that troubled him: a wolfish expression. He said no more, for Soames reached and hit him on the head with his automatic. But, drowsy though he was, the sailor saw the blow coming and half-dodged it, letting out a croak as he sagged to his knees across the spokes. Soames released the safety-catch and shot him in the brain.

"Tst-tst! Was that necessary?" asked Wendover, at the doorway.

"Seemed so." Soames' lips were tightened over his teeth, and he breathed in a hurried way. "There's no one to hear, anyway."

"You never know. Too late now, you fool! It's things like that that queer a job—and if the thing goes wrong, look out!" But a pistol-shot is a very trifling sound on the exposed bridge of a ship whose decks are throbbing and whose steel-work is chattering noisily to the impulse of her thrusting engines. It had sounded like a thunderclap to Wendover; but then he knew what it was, and knowledge magnified impressions. It was very unlikely that the three men still awake in the ship could have heard the report.

"Come on, then—wait a bit." Wendover ran the wheel over to hard starboard, and slipped the locking loop over a spoke. The *Berkeley Head* would thus trudge around in circles so long as her engines worked. Next, Wendover reached to the navigation light-switches and snapped them off; so that erratically moving lights might not attract the attention of a chance passing ship. Masthead lights, sidelights and overtaking light went out. There were no deck-lights burning; and the ports were carefully screened.

Satisfied, Wendover led the way to the boat-deck. There had been a boat-drill, according to regulations, on the previous Sunday; one boat had been hoisted out and lowered a little way to prove its readiness. This was the boat he had selected for his purpose. The *Berkeley Head* being a modern ship, her boat-gear was thoroughly up to date. The mere pulling of a lever sufficed to release the chucks and permit the big boat to swing outward sufficient to be lowered clear of the side.

BOTH men equipped themselves with axes from the other boats, and stove in the planking of all the remaining boats—five in all, making a thorough job of it, in order to prohibit all possibility of pursuit. The wash of water outboard drowned the crashing sound of the ax-blows completely, even if there had been any one about to overhear.

"Can do!" said Wendover, when the last boat was rendered into wreckage. "Now for it!" Then slipped agilely below, and reached the specie-cabin, removed the padlocked bar and turned the key in the door-lock. The old familiar itch troubled Wendover's fingers as the switched-on light showed the snugly stacked eighty cases of bullion.

"It's causing a lot of trouble, but it's worth it!" he chuckled. "Lovely old stuff—oh, darling!" He swung up a case in his hands and kissed it rapturously. It wasn't an easy task to swing the weighty thing to his lips, but he managed it. He greatly wanted to break open a package and run the glittering stuff through his fingers; but there wasn't time for rejoicing that might prove premature. He slung the case to his shoulder and sped to the boat-deck, Soames following him. They put the cases in the readied life-boat, sprinted back for more, and continued without a breathing-space. There was small chance of detection in this stage of the proceedings; the alleyway holding the specie-cabin was blind, leading nowhere; and there was a clear gangway to the boat-deck, past the captain's cabin. But before the gold was half-transferred, both men were sweating profusely.

"Spell-ho!" panted Wendover, with a hard laugh, when forty cases had been moved. "Let's see how the bus is running." They closed the cabin door and ran the bar across it. Then they made a comprehensive tour of inspection, leaving nothing to chance. Everything was as they had left it. The occupants of the saloon snored profoundly over the table; but to make matters doubly sure Wendover administered a scientific tap to each man's temple with his blackjack, repeating the operation in the engineers' mess. Just as he came out of the mess he met the third engineer, who was supposed to be on watch below. Wendover smiled saggingly.

"Hel—lo!" he gurgled in a thick voice. "You seem to—to have mished the fun!"

His eyes focussed on the very spot where his blackjack would strike home; and his left hand fondled the butt of his automatic in his side-pocket, in case shooting was necessary. He was always prepared for emergency. But seemingly the third engineer was as surprised as himself.

"Don't tell the chief!" he implored. "I slipped up for a peg before these beggars drank the lot—it's Christmas."

"They've drunk the lot," laughed Wendover. "But if you like to slip into my cabin there's still a shot in the locker."

"It'll only be for a minute, then—if the chief goes below and finds me away he'll raise hell!" Wendover led the way to his cabin, and Soames slipped out of the engineers' mess-room. He had dropped under the table at sound of voices, his pistol drawn, and his teeth bared back, ready for action. Had the third engineer suspected anything he would have been shot without a moment's hesitation. Soames seeing his chief had the situation well in hand, followed silently. In his cabin Wendover poured out a considerable noggin—a tumblerful of raw whisky. Drinking eagerly the third yet allowed his eyes to rove about the sleeping apartment. His glance rested on the case from which the pistols had been taken, its lid was torn off.

"Hello—what's that?" he asked. In an instant his eyes narrowed suspiciously; he half-stepped backward to the door. The sticks of dynamite were quite evident; and to his trained senses dynamite meant trouble. It wasn't the sort of stuff you would commonly see in a passenger's cabin.

"That?" laughed Wendover, his right hand in his pocket; "that's nothing—look and see." As the mechanic stooped the blackjack thudded; he sagged to his knees and collapsed limply.

"That might have torn it—I'd forgotten!" panted Wendover. "Leave him to me now—nip along and see to the cook and those others. Quick—we're losing time! I'd not counted on this."

SOAMES hastened along to the cook's quarters. He found the culinary specialist soddenly asleep, with a whisky bottle clutched by the neck in his hand. Soames took the bottle away, it gurgled. Before he realized what he had done he had swigged down the remaining contents. He hadn't intended to, but the temptation was too great. Not that it made any difference—he wasn't the sort to get drunk; and by the time his temper became affected, they'd be clear of the ship and away on their own excursion. He wouldn't have minded particularly shooting the cook where he lay but remembered the doctor and he had been quite good friends, playing many friendly games of euchre together, with the boatswain and donkeyman. So he expertly tied the cook up in his own bedclothes, with a dish-rag crammed into his mouth for a gag. Then he sprinted back to Wendover's cabin, meeting that worthy just as he emerged. This hint of interference and detection was quickening the pair; showing them what might happen; and they resumed the task of loading the specie-cases into the life-boat expeditiously. By the time that work was done they were both lathering freely. Wendover looked at his radiolite watch; the time was quarter of an hour of midnight.

"Not such bad timing as all that," he congratulated himself. "Now for the engine-room."

They went there quickly; for it had occurred to Wendover that in all likelihood one of the men on duty below would come on deck to arouse the reliefs. He was cutting it rather fine. But it was hardly likely the greaser would leave the engine-room in the engineer's absence—unless he came up to see what was keeping him. A touch of apprehension troubled him; he literally ran to the engine-room. It had been his intention, providing the engineer were below, to say that he was availing himself of invitation to inspect the workings below; but that excuse would no longer serve. The greaser was on the second platform, he saw, attending to the dynamo. He was absorbed in his work. Wendover slithered down the greasy ladder as quickly as he could, intending to take him unawares; but the greaser stood erect just as the crook's feet touched the grating. Sensing that something was wrong, the man swung around, reaching for a spanner. He was a corpulent, phlegmatic man enough; but the sight of the passenger slithering down the ladder at midnight was enough to startle him out of his calm.

"What d'yer want?" he bellowed. He stood poised, the heavy spanner swinging in his hand.

"You!" snapped Wendover; the man of quick thought and simultaneous action; and his pistol leaped out and up like lightning. In the crashing din of the engine-room the sound of the report was almost inaudible. The greaser lurched, clapped his dirty hands to his hairy chest, stared pathetically, like a whipped dog, at Wendover.

"You've—shot—me!" he coughed. "You've—" He flung the spanner at the passenger, missing him by several feet, twirled round and collapsed into a huddled heap beside the humming dynamo. The thin reedy shout from below caused Wendover to turn on his heel—the watch-fireman had seen what had transpired through the gratings Matters were becoming complicated; Wendover grew impatient. Being in no mood to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar, he rested the muzzle of his automatic on his arm and took a pot-shot at the fireman down there among the jetting steam and the crashing machinery. At the same moment Soames fired from the upper platform; and as both men were crack shots—Wendover's target exhibition being merely judicious camouflage—it is possible that the fireman was hit by one or both bullets: but that cannot be certain. It may have been amazement that caused him to lose his balance and slide under the guard-rail into the low-pressure crank-pit. Wendover, his teeth bared again, saw him fall, and notwithstanding his cold callousness, felt suddenly sick and cold. The temperature of the engine-room must have been about one hundred and twenty; but to his fancy it was freezing there.

"Hell!" he gulped. "Well, it's done now!" He chased up the greasy ladder again, remembering his program. Along to his cabin he went and returned with a stick of dynamite. Not until he reached the floor-plates did he cramp in the fuse. His main idea was to render the ship helpless, so that nothing in the shape of pursuit could be effected. He darted to the throttle wheel and stopped the surging machinery; a great calm fell on the noisy room. He laid his stick of giant-powder against the thrust-blocks, which take the drive of the propeller and convey motion to the whole fabric, weighed it down with the biggest spanner he could lay hands to, and lit the fuse. Then he chased up the ladders to the deck above; and felt the ship shake to the explosion as he reached the open, where Soames was awaiting him.

THEY had packed a suitcase with such few requisites as seemed necessary, and Soames brought this from the cabin to the boat.

"That all?" he asked.

"Just about! Wish that fellow hadn't fallen the way he did—ugh! I'm going to remember that! Can't be helped, though—there's bound to be eggshells split when you're making omelettes."

"He's omelette all right," grated Soames, the killer-man.

"Hold on, though—I was almost forgetting!" It must have been that last little bit of excitement that had interrupted the even run of the crook's thoughts. Wendover still felt nauseated. But passing the wireless cabin he remembered; and, entering, he dexterously demolished the effective working parts of the radio installation. He hadn't known much about the intricacies of wireless when he embarked aboard the *Berkeley Head;* but the operator had shown a friendly spirit; a youthful pride in his gear, and was not above explaining details to such an interested individual as the chatty passenger. Inside two minutes Alexander Wendover made a ruin of the orderly apartment; so that in the event of the operator coming to his senses too soon the possibilities of an ocean-wide alarm being conveyed were rendered remote.

"That's about all, I reckon!" he said, returning to where Soames stood by the swung-out life-boat. "Stand by to lower away."

Stopped, the *Berkeley Head* was astonishingly quiet. What had seemed a considerable breeze was in reality only a modest trade-zephyr. The funnel-guys harped a little mournfully; and the weather-cloth on the bridge frapped and slatted. The absence of the familiar throbbing of the decks created an impression that the ship was holding her breath. Waves slapped merrily against her halted bulk. Occasionally, as she listlessly rolled, a metallic clank sounded, startlingly clear. The fired boilers, their steam no longer expended, blew off with a harsh and startling roar, shaking the fabric to her keel. That was a contingency Wendover had not prepared against. He was more familiar with coal-fired ships than the oil-fired variety; and had thought that lack of fuel would automatically cause the fires to die down. He wasn't sure what might happen to the *Berkeley Head* now; perhaps she would burst her boilers and sink like a leaky can. Well, that couldn't be helped, so long as he got clear with the loot; and that was certain enough now.

The two men worked handily with the lowering falls of the life-boat, which ran as smoothly as oil through the well-lubricated sheaves. Wendover, remembering his sailorizing, had forethought enough to make the painter fast before lowering; as the boat touched the water he shouted to Soames to hold on everything, and then slide down the fall. The two men gained the boat simultaneously, stumbling about over the roughly stacked cases of specie. Now and then, thanks to the ship's rolling, the boat, still held by the tackles, was half-lifted from the water, to settle back with a squelch. Such a squelch as the fireman must have caused when the crank hit him, Wendover thought, and was again aware of nausea. But he conquered it: an iron-hard man, set on an object, indifferent to the means whereby that object was attained.

"Feel around until you find that quick-release," he ordered. He had explained in detail the working of the lowering gear to Soames on more than one occasion. To do so had been a simple matter: an experienced employer taking a proud delight in displaying his knowledge to an underling.

"Got it," said Soames.

"Pull, then!" The chains clashed, and the lower tackle block thudded against the ship's plates, the stern of the boat was free. Wendover watched his chance and pulled his quick release; caught up a boathook and thrust manfully. The boat slid away from the hull which towered broodingly above. One or two glimmers of light showed from the portholes. The escaping steam continued to roar.

"Done it!" exulted Wendover. "Let's start by shipping the rowlocks; and when we have an offing, we'll hoist sail and run for Pavlo Rocks. As easy as falling off a tree, when you come to reckon it up."

IT HAD, indeed, been astonishingly easy, when the affair was reckoned up. Two men, working methodically, having planned the detail scientifically beforehand, and rehearsed until the scheme was fool-proof, had successfully looted a seven-thousand ton steamer of four tons of gold in mid-ocean, notwithstanding that thirty-five men actually guarded ship and treasure. The possibilities of pursuit were remote—at all events nothing could be done before dawn—which was almost six hours away. Six hours of hard sailing; and the comparatively tiny life-boat would be lost in the waste of waters—maybe Pavlo Rocks would be in sight, where was the speedy *Tomtit*, and safety. Once aboard her Wendover was prepared to snap his fingers at all thought of pursuit or detection. Was it likely that any one—least of all complacent tropical officials—would associate the trim yacht with that deep-sea looting? Ridiculous!

They got out oars and pulled steadily for a while, anxious to put a distance between themselves and the freighter. The boat pulled heavily—she was fitted for six oars; but she progressed, with gurglings. The roar of exhaust steam thinned as the space increased.

"Now, we can set sail," said Wendover. His seafaring had taught him to work by feel as much as by sight; and the gear was laid in readiness anyhow. It required only a few minutes to step the mast and hoist the big mainsail, to get the boat away before the wind, which felt more vigorous down there than it had done on the sheltered freighter's deck. Wendover laid a rough southerly course, keeping the North Star astern; and the plash and ripple of parted water sounded a tuneful and enthusiastic note to his ears. The night was mild, notwithstanding the northerly run of the wind; and though the motion of the boat was increasingly lively it seemed to add to the sense of exultation.

"If there'd been a cold million pounds instead of four hundred thousand, we could have managed it," he said to Soames.

Soames was nodding; he roused himself with a start to mutter: "We could—easy!"

"Don't you go sleeping yet—there's still work to do," said Wendover. Soames only grunted. The effects of his last drink were not yet died away; but his temper was a bit frayed, as it usually was after a large quantity of alcohol. Curiously enough he wasn't thinking, in his bemused, sleepy fashion, of the gold, nor yet of the helmsman he had shot; nor was he elatedly proud of the skilful way in which his chief had managed the coup. He was brooding over the fact that Wendover had called him a booze-hound. He wasn't that—he was a man who shunned liquor when a clear head was demanded. And there wasn't a man alive could deny that he'd done his share of tonight's work as well as any one could do. You couldn't all be master-minds; but you'd make a long day's journey before you found a better follower than John Soames.

"I wasn't thinking of sleeping," he growled.

"Well, don't do it. Catch hold of this tiller for a bit and I'll put some more muslin on her."

SOAMES took the tiller, nodding drowsily over it, as Wendover crawled over the cases of specie and dragged the triangular foresail from its bag. Hoisting the canvas was a matter of some difficulty; but it was accomplished without accident. The boat immediately answered to the added impulse, and the gurgling ripples from under her quarter sounded louder. She leaped joyously from crest to crest of the frolicking waves. There was a suggestion of speed and striving about the run of the fabric; but—the canvas flapped.

"Watch her, you idiot!" snapped Wendover. The North Star, instead of being dead astern, was well away on the port quarter. "Look out—you'll catch her aback before you know where you are!" He hastily scrambled aft, took the tiller, and got the boat away before the wind again, impatiently pushing Soames aside.

"Make yourself useful; expect me to do all the graft?" he cried. "Find the compass and give us a light, so we can lay a fair course." The hooded compass was in its beckets under the midship thwart of the boat; and Soames found it. After his sweating he had grown cold, was aware that he was only lightly clad. His teeth chattered in his head, and he fumbled somewhat aimlessly with the matches.

"Next time I try a job of this sort I'll bring a sailorman with me," said Wendover.

"I'm doing my best." There was a hint of a snarl in Soames' voice now. "Say, now the job's done, is there any objection to a man having a drink? There's a bottle in the suitcase—I saw to it."

"You would. Wait a bit; we'll run away a bit before we celebrate." The binnacle was illuminated; Wendover placed the compass in position, adjusting it in its socket so that the lubber's line corresponded with the boat's fore-and-aft line. He notched that line on the S. S. E. point, and noticed that the boat steered like a liner—to a degree. He pleased himself by slacking a sheet, juggling with the tiller, familiarizing himself with the boat's possibilities. He was quietly happy—a successful man, who had acquired a negotiable fortune. His delight in the behavior of the life-boat was almost childish.

Soames nodded listlessly, crouched down in the boat's bottom, his head rested against the stack of specie-boxes. At that particular moment he felt that he would have given the whole eighty cases for a swig at the whisky bottle in the suitcase he was just in the mood for a drink, to cancel the gnawing hunger of his stomach.

"Don't see why he need call me a booze-hound, either!" he thought. "It isn't as if I liquored regular; and he might let me have a drink now—we've boned enough to buy a damned distillery."

THE roar of the freighter's exhaust had clean died away by now; there was only the plash of broken water and the rumble of distended canvas. The sky overhead was clear; the stars glowed brightly. Wendover thought of the specie, and was conscious of an itching. A vague fear began to trouble him. He was a man of an eminently suspicious nature, as practically all criminals are; and he remembered to have heard of cases where plants had been deliberately arranged for the foiling of precisely such attempts as this of his.

"Wonder if it hasn't been a bit too easy!" he thought. "They took it all as a matter of course aboard there—I wonder!" Yet it was hardly likely that any one would go to the trouble of loading eighty spoof cases aboard the ship, while the genuine specie was shipped in another bottom. "When it comes daylight I'll open one of the cases," he decided, "and make sure. Fine silly ass I'd look, running alongside the *Tomtit* with a cargo of broken bricks!" But he lifted a case and shook it, hoping to hear the heartening chink of metal. The stuff was too well packed for that, however; there wasn't even a thud. The itching in his fingers increased; he longed to set those fingers dabbling with the chinking yellow pieces.

The darkness was a handicap, too—a specie-box wasn't opened as easily as all that. Best to wait until daylight showed—it was hardly likely he'd had all his trouble for nothing. He began to wish, however, that he'd instructed the *Tomtit* to await him at sea; he was beginning to feel a bit drowsy himself, he longed for the comfort of a cabin aboard the yacht—a cabin and a meal. For though the Christmas dinner aboard the freighter had been a handsome meal, he'd really eaten very little; he'd been too busy thinking over details to give attention to his own needs. He'd put in some pretty strenuous work since then, too. Hefting forty cases of specie wasn't a boy's job by any means.

"Get out that bottle of grog and we'll have a tot now," he said, pushing Soames with his foot. Soames wasn't really aroused; cold and the drinks he'd had bred in him something akin to a stupor.

"Get the hell out o' that!" he gloomed.

"Wake up, you boozehound—get busy. Grog-ho!" cried Wendover jovially. His meaning penetrated to Soames' half-fuddled mind; so did the epithet. He stirred and busied himself, found the suitcase with some difficulty, and extracted the bottle.

"Dashed if I didn't forget a corkscrew!" he mumbled.

"Ah, my son, that's wherein you fellows fail; you forget the little things!" triumphed Wendover. "Here you are—there's a corkscrew in my knife. Look alive!" He passed the knife over, with the corkscrew opened, and its sharp point stabbed into Soames' palm.

"Clumsy!" he rasped, feeling the sting of pain acutely.

"Don't let me have the thick edge of your tongue!" was Wendover's retort. "Want me to feed you out of a bottle—like a baby? Not that sort of a bottle!" Soames got out the cork with a heartening plop; and taking advantage of the darkness, helped himself to a large swallow. He felt better after that, and passed the bottle to his companion; who drank moderately. The sting of the liquor wakened Wendover; but it increased Soames' drowsiness. Presently Wendover heard him snore; and that snoring went on until the first glimmer of approaching dawn showed on the port beam.

AS A result of much thinking the itch in Wendover's fingers had increased to an almost unbearable extent. It was only with difficulty that he contained himself from opening a case or two of the specie. He forced away that temptation by thinking of what the future was likely to hold for him. There was nothing but good promise ahead. There was the stuff, ahead lay freedom. He indulged in frequent dry chuckles as he pictured the emotions that would possess the freighter's crew when they aroused from their stupor and realized the thing that had been done. He chuckled again at thought of their utter helplessness. Unless a ship chanced to sight the useless *Berkeley Head*, there wasn't anything that could be done. She'd just drift and drift, with no wireless to summon assistance! He'd made a pretty good job of wrecking the radio plant. And that giant powder wouldn't leave much of the thrust-blocks. It was a pity about those men who'd been killed, though—it sort of took the fine edge off the neat perfection of the job. The artistry was blurred. However, those who remained alive might congratulate themselves that they were actually alive.

"There's many a man would have sunk that packet," he decided; "to hide his tracks. Not me, though—I don't believe in useless killing."

The faint graying disclosed to him first the sprawled figure of Soames, who lay on his back, his head pillowed on specie, his mouth wide open; next the stack of cases; and the itch returned. He thrust at Soames with his foot.

"Wake up you scrimshanker!" he snorted. "Get busy—this job's not done yet." Soames grunted and stirred, turned on his side, and a hastily piled case tumbled from above on to his head. He wakened at that, and bared his teeth in a snarl.

"Don't start no hitting tricks here!" he rasped. It was always the way after whisky; his temper was red-raw at the edges, and he would have quarrelled with his best friend. That epithet of boozehound rankled damnably in his distorted mind. He felt, looking at Wendover through red mists, that he wouldn't half mind shooting him where he sat there; and if he knew anything about handling a boat, he might try that trick, too—only—no, it wouldn't do. The people aboard the *Tomtit* would ask too many questions.

"You keep your mouth shut—you've been drinking too much," snapped Wendover. "Get the ax and bring it along here—I want to open a case." Soreheaded, Soames complied, and attacked the uppermost case of the pile.

"Be careful you don't knock it overboard," Wendover warned him. "It isn't rubble you're handling now, same as when you were in the chain-gang." This was meant merely as a joke; but Soames wasn't in a joking mood, by any means. He coupled the reference to his term of imprisonment with that epithet "boozehound"; and his disordered brain flooded with black patches that were reddish at the edges.

"I know what I'm about!" he half-sobbed. He struck a blow at the iron band about the case; but it was a maladroit blow, the metal did not snap. He hacked again, half-wishing that he was hewing a way through Wendover's head. The metal answered after three slashes; it parted, leaving an upturned end with ragged edges.

"Now the other," said Wendover, unable to admire his companion's workmanship; a suggestion of a sneer was in his voice. The second band parted with a metallic twang; and Soames set to work to pry the cover off. It was fastened down with complicated screws and clamps; but the ax made short work of these hindrances. He gashed his hand rather badly on the ragged iron, and cursed as he bent its end back to give him a clearer field. Then he lifted the lid, and tore away the canvas lining inside. The sovereigns were there in rouleaux; there was no mistake. The itching in Wendover's fingers increased; he abandoned the tiller momentarily, and stood on the seat to get a better view. He thrust his hand into the case and handled the coins lovingly—lifting them, allowing them to trickle through his fingers; weighing them—lifting them to his face and smelling them.

"NICE stuff, gold!" he triumphed. "And we've got it, Johnny—we've got it! Everything's worked just-so, eh? Never a real hitch—trust me for that. Fool-proof; like stealing a baby's feeding-bottle, it was that easy. Trust Uncle Alec every time. What's that over there, a cloud?" The horizon was obscured; but what attracted his attention might conceivably have been land—and the only land in the vicinity was Pavlo Rocks. Havenage and security lay there—probably another six hours' sailing, if this good breeze held, as it promised to hold. With his hand still dabbling in the gold, he searched the revealed sea-surface. Of the *Berkeley-Head* nothing was to be seen; there was no trail of smoke anywhere; nothing to break the even ring of the skyline. It might be that his dynamite had actually blown a hole in her skin and sent her down—such things had happened before. Well, it wasn't any affair of Alexander Wendover's; he hadn't meant to destroy life any more than was actually necessary. What did it matter—there was the gold; sure proof of his own daring and skill.

Soames sucked at his bleeding hand, scowling, as the lees of the drink quickened within him.

"What about another liquor-up?" he asked; "seeing we've won out?"

"Wait until we've made the *Tomtit*; best to think about grub, isn't it? You can have a proper drink when we're aboard the yatcht Look around and get some grub: open a tin of beef, get some biscuits—anything."

"I'd like a drink!"

"I dare say you would, you perishing boozehound; but we're not going to spoil everything by boozing now—we're not finished."

"Well, if you won't let me have a swaller I'm going to take it, see?" snarled Soames. "I reckon I've done my share of this job; and if a man can't have a drink on the strength of it, it's a pity. You hand over that bottle."

"Go to the devil!" said Wendover; who brooked small insolence from subordinates. "Don't forget you're under orders."

HE WASN'T afraid of Soames; he knew the man. But Soames wanted a drink to numb the misery that was assailing him, bred of the blow on the head, the smart of his wound, and the nausea that follows indulgence.

"You stand aside," said Soames, and made to thrust past Wendover, who was standing on the seat. Wendover clutched at his shoulder, swung him about.

"No, you don't!" he said sharply; and Soames lurched. Probably to save himself from a fall he clawed at Wendover, who swung aside to avoid the grapple, thinking it meant a definite attack.

"Hi—honest to God, I never meant that!" Wendover's cry was in the air as he went overboard. Soames fell back against the piled specie, an arm across the opened case.

Wendover came to the surface, a little astern of the boat. "Throw a rope, you fool! I can't swim!" he cried chokingly.

The distance between boat and man increased.

"All right—I can swim!" Soames realized things in a flash. He himself knew very little about handling a boat. Without Wendover he was helpless. But he was a notable swimmer. There didn't seem to be much time for thinking along clear lines: anyway, his brains were still a bit bemused, and his thoughts were thickened at the edges. The primary instinct of a swimmer, seeing a man drowning, is to dive after him and save him.

Soames started to do that; but the luck was against him. He reached to dive but the ragged turn-up of the iron band about the opened specie box had fixed itself in his coat like the barb of a fishhook. It had gone right through to his shirt, too—it held him back.

"Look slippy!" choked Wendover distantly. Soames fought to free himself; but the hundredweight case was like an anchor. He could not twitch around to tear the barb clear all at once. He wrenched, but the material of his coat was good; it wouldn't give. He tried to strip the garment away; but he couldn't rid himself of the hook. It held to his shirt. He tore wildly at his garments; and Wendover screamed—a shrill, eldritch note that died away into a choked gurgle. When Soames sacrificed his shirt and stood forth naked to the waist, there was nothing to be seen of Wendover, who'd made his scheme fool-proof. Nothing—even the last bubbles from his lungs were gone.

Soames stared bleakly outboard. He'd heard drowning men scream before, and recognized the sound. He didn't know what to do—he was alone with two million dollars in gold, in a boat that he didn't know how to control. Fool-proof, eh? He juggled unskilfully with the tiller, wanting to do something—anything; and fetched the boat fairly aback. There was a rattle and a crack; and mast and sails pitched overboard.

When the people of the S. S. *Minegan* overhauled the *Berkeley Head's* life-boat, they found it wandering aimlessly around in circles. Soames pulled at one oar, muttering "fool-proof, by heck—fool-proof!" He found it difficult to explain everything when he recovered his senses. In fact, he never did explain it all—the hangman's noose prevented it. That was fool-proof, at all events.

Part Two

Beatrice Grimshaw's Romance of The Dark Islands of The Pacific

Black Sheep's

Preceding events briefly retold

Philip Amory, war veteran and proprietor of a trading-post in Daru, Papua, returning from Cairns on a B. P. boat, rescued Jinny Treacher, a chorus girl, from sharks. This deed won him Jinny's heart and also the affection of Pia Laurier, a fellow passenger and the daughter of wealthy Australians.

Amory became madly in love with Pia, but realized he was in no social or financial position to press his suit. Furthermore he learned from the ship gossip that Pia is engaged to a Sir Richard Fanshawe. On leaving the ship at Thursday Island, Amory meets Fanshawe who is coming on board.

The name Fanshawe means little to Amory, but the glimpse he got of him made him feel sure he had seen the man before. He could not get this thought out of his mind during the next few weeks at Daru.

On an evening when two of the Assistant Resident Magistrates were in Bassett, the Resident Magistrate invited Amory, called Black Sheep, in Daru "mostly because his eyes are black, and his hair, and partly because he is a decent sort of chap," to dinner. Besides the expected guests an Englishman named Spicer was present, a pompous ass and the forerunner of another so-called expedition going from Papua to the other side. Spicer explained he was to organize the party while awaiting his chief, Sir Richard Fanshawe. At the mention of Fanshawe's name from another's lips, Amory's memory gets a jolt—he remembers with horror when and where he saw Fanshawe before.

ON THE glass that hung opposite the table, I saw my face turn to something like a piece of white blotting-paper, with black blots for eyes and brows. I didn't know that I saw it; I remembered that after. At the moment, I was only concerned with getting out of the house. Spicer, the R. M., Northanger and Purchase, might all have been taken out and drowned together in a bag, for what I cared. There was nothing that I cared about, nothing that I knew, save that mad instinct to bolt off the course and get away.

We had done dinner, and were just moving back into the miscalled mosquito-room. I touched my host on the shoulder.

"Sorry," I lied, "but I've got a touch of fever; I'll have to go home."

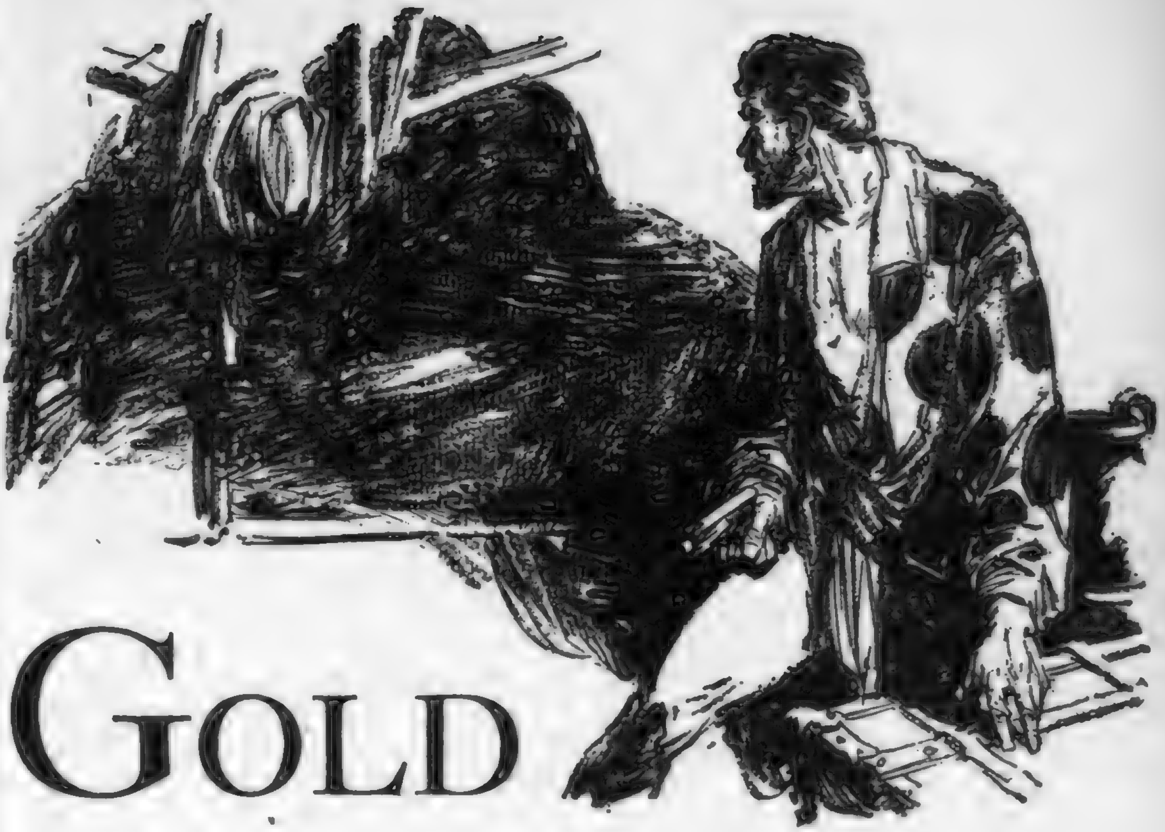
"Hard luck. Have a whisky?" was Bassett's response. I shook my head.

"Quinine?"

"Not now, thanks."

"You do look most awfully sick, Black Sheep. Better get to bed; you might be coming down with blackwater."

"Night!" I said, and slipped away. As I descended the veranda steps, the loud,



GOLD

high voice of Spicer was still holding forth. "Where you have failed," he was telling Northangerand Purchase, who had mapped out enough new country to deserve a dozen R. G. S. medals— "Where you have all of you given way—" (there was not a man in the room but had performed feats of surprise, attack, capture among the wild cannibals of the interior, enough to furnish plots to a dozen movies.) "I shall succeed; I and my chief. We shall plant the flag of the British Empiah where never flag has waved before. We are organized; prepared, for anything that may happen. What we expect to find. . . ."

I remember, wondering, as I went through the garden, and into the Croton-walk, at a dog-trot, if Spicer and his gang, perchance, had picked up some rumor of the secret that was my capital and my hope. I remember telling myself that it did not matter if they had. Nothing mattered except what I had, with shock and horror unspeakable, recalled.

The house was too small for me, that night. I did not go home. Under the great stars, I found the island's main roadway, a stately avenue bordered by mango trees that, in daylight, were huge domes of fiery green, by night, a wall that blotted half the sky.

The fourteen whites of Daru, the few score Papuan prisoners, the village folk who, in daylight, passed up and down from the stores, were all under cover, most of them asleep. The world, beneath the immense black shadow of the mangoes, was left to me.

I don't know how far I walked, backward and forward, backward and forward, along that half-mile of blackness with a ribbon of stars running through. I did not want to pass on to the open country beyond; I wanted to be hidden—to recall, here in the loneliness and the dark, every least detail that had to do with the thing I remembered.

NINETEEN—nineteen the year; myself, newly demobolized, spending my gratuity money in a hurried trip through the South Sea Islands that I, in common with thousands of others, had always wished to know. Impatience, I remembered, with the big ports of Samoa and Fiji, that were, after all, so much like other tropical places. Somebody who said—"You should have seen The Islands years ago, before the War—ten years before. They're not what they were. Too many dashed tourists now. If you can handle boats, get a cutter with a bit of a cabin, and go away back. Where from? Anywhere almost. Out of reach of steamers and Cook tickets, that's all."

The cutter hired; a native or two engaged as crew. Weeks, then, of the happiness I had come far to seek. "Through the Looking Glass," I had gone like the child in the immortal tale—and everything now was magically changed. With delight, I learned what life can be when that tyrant, Time, is toppled off his throne; how rich one suddenly becomes in all the things that matter—how a morning may be a minute long, or a century, and in either case filled with joy to the edges, and spilling over. How the sun of midday, honey-thick and honey-yellow, can look, through leaves green as shoal water, when you lie on your mat of pandanus, all the hot hours of the day, because it is just and reasonable so to lie, with the moon-blanched night of ten hours long awaiting you, and the fishing and the swimming, and the dancing and drinking and eating and loving, under the moon, to come. How the song of the canoes, skimming the reef-water with chant and beat of drum, from brown men and women, with rattle and plunge of paddles in water blue as blue flowers, can steal into your heart, and all by itself, sing there, melodies never written for the ears of those who live in the lands of Cold and Time. How in the year that is a day, and the day that is a year, a man perhaps may lose his way, drop the clues that lead through the tangled maze called Life, and wander, timeless, aimless, till the dark.

This I learned and much more, which may have left its mark; helped toward the finding of my own fate, later on. For the South Sea Islands, the darling South Sea Islands, were not my final joys. I sickened of their honey; I looked for a more fiery draught. But whatever it was, I knew—as I have always known—that I could drink it from no cup save that of freedom.

It must have been about the sixth month of my journeying, when, with money running low, and mind almost sated with tropic beauties and wonders—so that I began to think I might soon, without regret, return to civilization—I came upon a group of islands that I shall call Omega.

There is a town in the Omega group; a town that, for reasons I cannot give here, offers more commercial interests and possibilities than most island places. This is important, and should be remembered; it has to do with what I am going to tell.

The town appealed to me but little. It was the outer part of the archipelago that drew me; thin atoll islands, barren and very bright; islets with here and there a coconut palm, and here and there a lost melancholy looking pandanus tree; shoal waters that were mauve and sapphire, pearl and celadon-green. I had bought the cutter by this time, with a small windfall of a legacy that came my way, and I had just enough money left to run her for a few more weeks. I hadn't cash for anything of a crew, however, save one old silly fellow who was willing to come without wages. He professed to know the group from end to end, and though I was a little doubtful of his knowledge, I could not afford to quarrel with it, or him. After all, I thought, we shall get somewhere, and come away somehow, and that's all one really wants.

If I had known! It was a windy, wicked afternoon, high clouds flying, that we got blown away from our course; obliged to abandon all attempt to get to the group of atolls for which I had been aiming. The cutter had been cheap, and was a bit crazy; if you sailed her too hard she was in the habit of leaking—these last few weeks. We had taken in as much water as I thought we could afford; the sea was getting the better of the bailing. By sundown, I had decided to give it up; close-reef, and run before the wind till dawn. There was, so far as I knew, nothing in our way, and Omega itself was within a couple of hundred miles, if we had to put right back again.

I gave the tiller into the hand of Taviti, the "crew," slung my two sleeping-boards across the seats, and lay down with a rice sack under my head. Taviti was to call me at moonrise, which I judged to be about ten o'clock.

I didn't sleep for a while. The cutter pitched violently in the cross sea raised by tide and wind, hammering with her bows on the water till you might have thought she would stave herself in. Taviti, with the sheet in one hand and his toes on the tiller, squatted aft, singing, in his old-man voice, an island song as windy and wild as the cries of the gulls that followed us. When I opened my eyes, which was often, I could see the black clouds streaming across the blacker sky, and stars between, that seemed to sail and scurry too; and the white edges of the breaking waves; and Taviti's light loincloth, rising and falling against the dark. It looked like ugly weather, I thought and then, of a sudden, I slept.

I was awakened by the smothering dash of salt water over my head, and a blow from the cutter's gunwale, that got me in the ribs as I was being swept overboard. Everything about me was white foam and churning water; I felt sand beneath my toes, but could not grip it, because the short, breaking waves had me at their will, and were knocking me about as a child batters a toy. I fought, and got foothold at last. The cutter was lying on her side, smashing her mast and rigging as she swayed about with the seas. Taviti was just crawling out on to a stone, like a rat escaped from the drowning-pail. There was high moon above us—it must have been near one o'clock—and I could see a bit of stony, sandy coast, and a belt of coconuts. Just what you see on a thousand islands of a hundred island groups. Nothing that was not like all the rest.

"Where are we?" I shouted to Taviti, as I crawled out beside him. There was no use scolding him for his careless handling of the boat, now. I never had been one of those who either weep over spilt milk, or try to lick it up. Low tide would strand the cutter; till then, one could do little or nothing.

"I d'know, Ariki (chief)," mournfully answered the old man. Then, with a burst of animation—"I think we somewheres."

"Well, wherever we are," I said, "the first thing to do is to get the cable of the boat fast to something." And that, with considerable difficulty, we did, securing what was left of her to one of the big black stones, so that she might not be carried away by outgoing tide. Taviti, after this, found a little hole—you could hardly call it cave—among the rocks, and dragged himself into it, covering his lean, wet body, so far as he could, with a mass of seaweed.

"Ariki, very good we stay here; by-'n'-by sun come up, we go look-see," he piped.

"You can stay," I told him; and left him there, while I started to explore the place, and find out, if I could, where Taviti's mad seamanship, backed by my own carelessness, had landed me. The worst of it was that I knew next to nothing of Omega or its outlying islands, large and small. I had drifted there by chance, while conveying myself and my cutter from Fiji by trading steamer to quite another port. The call at Omega was unexpected; equally unexpected my snap decision to stop there. And now, I was reaping the fruit of what seemed a very foolish impulse.

LEAVING the boat to await low tide, I tramped inland. It was not much past full moon time; and nowhere on earth's surface does the moon shine with more effect, than on a coral island. Surrounding sea, enclosed lagoon, white beach, all throw back the light-rays like so many mirrors; you walk in a spray of melted silver; the palms above you toss off light from glassy leaves, like a fountain throwing myriad drops of crystal. I could see everything about me almost as plainly as in the day. And I did not like what I saw.

It is easy to say that I am influenced, looking back, by the things that happened after; that I merely fancy I didn't care for the place at first sight. Easy, but not true. There are such things as warnings; and if ever I felt a warning, it was then. There was nothing at all in front of me but a belt of grassy soil, sprinkled with palms and low hibiscus bushes; an inner lagoon gleamed faintly through the trees, and rocks, here and there, sticking up like little minarets or spires, showed the soil to be barren. Nothing else—but I felt (how shall I put it?) that this place was not good to be in. The trees were like the trees you see in a nightmare; one did not wish to be alone with them. The inner lake gleamed like an angry eye.

There was a personality about the place—every one has felt such things, though few care to say so—and it was distinctly hostile.

Of course, that did not stop me from exploring; I had to find out where we were. Further, I was wet through, without a change; it was a tropic night, but tropic nights, with high wind blowing, can be unpleasantly cool, and I shivered a bit, as I tramped the rough, blown grasses; I should have been glad of a house wherein I might take shelter, and find somebody's clothes to borrow. I rather thought the island was inhabited. In the moonlight, I had seen traces of footsteps, or what looked like footsteps, in the grass; I had seen a pile of coconuts heaped up at the foot of a palm.

Wandering natives might have accounted for both; but somehow, that was not my opinion. All South Sea travelers know there is a front and back to every island; I judged that we had been spilt ashore (for you could not call it wrecked) at the back of this place, whatever it might be. I tramped, and shivered, and continued in my search for the front.

IT WAS about twenty minutes after landing, when I was getting well warmed up with exercise, that I ran across the houses. I struck them quite unexpectedly, coming on them as they lay in a shallow depression, with their peaked roofs clear against the moon and the inner salt lake of the atoll. They were two or three only, mere hovels thrown together of brushwood and palm. About them a few bananas of the coarser kind struggled to maintain existence; the big leaves battered about in the night-wind, with a sound like clapping of hands, and I saw a flying-fox, most evil of all things that make the dark their day, skim, with winnowing black wings and pointed muzzle clear against the stars, among the dangling fruits.

The houses seemed to me to be semi-alive, crouching, as if afraid of my approach. It may have been this fancy that urged me to take care, walk delicately, as I neared them. Most were unlighted; from one, however, came a faint red gleam through plaited walls. Somebody, within, was waking, while the rest of the island slept.

The wind had risen, was still rising. It made an intolerable clamor, now, among the palm-tree tops, thrashing about the higher crests, and beating the lower ones against the roof of an iron copra shed that stood a little way off, ice-white beneath the moon. Masked by the noise, I walked right up to the house-wall, and peered through a chink.

I do not know what I expected to see; something astonishing, certainly—but whatever it may have been, it was less amazing than the reality. Looking inside the hut, I saw no native chief, no beautiful brown girl, no heap of hidden treasure—and mind you—I was so worked up with the accident, and the wind, and the queer place where we had landed, that I was ready to expect and believe in any or all of these things.

I saw a white man like myself; a well-bred looking man, with a beard, brown eyes, and wavy brown hair. He was dressed in a most extraordinary rig—loincloth and jumper, such as the natives use, but of a pattern never worn by any native of the Pacific world, yellow, with spots of black as big as dinner plates. Ugly, conspicuous in the last degree—and so coarse in texture that its folds were stiff as canvas.

"Ought to last a lifetime, that rig," I thought. "Bad sort of thing to go shooting or fishing in; anything alive would spot you a hundred yards off. Why in Tophet does he wear it?"

The question was no sooner asked than answered. He wasn't going to wear it—any longer than he could help. He had been busy packing a small bag, when I looked in; now, snapping the lock, he began pulling off his hideous shirt, and loosening the loincloth. Hung up on a rafter beside him, I saw a European suit, crumpled and earth-stained; it looked almost as if it had been buried and dug up again.

The crack was narrow; I stretched forward to look through, and managed, somehow, to stagger against the flimsy hut wall. It creaked and bent in as if it had been made of paper. The man must have seen it move; with his arm half out of his shirt, he made a snatch at a revolver that was lying beside the bag, and swung round, eyes glaring like a cat's when it sees prey, to face the spot where I was standing.

I did not stand long. Covered by the noise of the wind, I bolted as hard as I could go for a tussock of hibiscus bush, and dropped into it. By the time the man had got out of the hut, I was lying low, safe among interlaced stems, and peering through. If I died for it, I was going to know what all this was about.

THERE were dozens of tussocks near the house; he must have seen the futility of trying to search them. He stood in the doorway, outlined by the smoky flame of his hurricane lamp, and staring wildly about. The spotted-leopard clothes were fastened again; they looked very odd, with the socks and boots he was wearing, and the hat he held in one hand. It was a handsome, well-bred hand, but the little finger, I noticed, had a defective and broken nail.

"Black," he called in a cautious voice that scarcely carried through the wind. "Black —was that you?" I thought he rather hoped it was. Black; was arguing with himself that it couldn't have been any one else.

A freakish humor seized me. I slipped out at the back of the tussock, and showed my head.

"Yes," I answered, aware that no man could identify another in that light, under trees, at fifty yards' distance.

"What the devil are you playing about, then?"

"Don't want to be seen," I answered truthfully.

This seemed to satisfy him, more or less. "Is the launch there?" he asked presently. I said it was.

"Go and get everything ready to start. I'll be down in two minutes."

This was awkward. I could not be sure of safety, once I left the shelter of the bushes. Black might be inches taller or shorter, stones heavier or lighter, than I. I hesitated, uncertain what to do.

It seemed that the man in the hut could not endure delay. "What are you messing and waiting about?" he demanded, with an oath. "If I'm caught, so are you, and it's five years on the breakwater."

("So I'm supposed to be committing a crime. I wonder what?" I thought.) The freakish devil that had possession of me prompted me to reply—at a venture, "What about the money?"

This let loose a surprising flood of profanity. I judged that Mr. Black, whoever he was, had been exacting in his demands.

"Money?" (Fiery interval.) "Money? What do you want? Five hundred already, and another five when you land me in Valparaiso," ("Valparaiso—in a launch!" I thought. "Whom has he been murdering?")

"—And all the cursed expenses into the bargain, and you want more!"

"No," I shouted across the wind. "No. I'm going off to the launch."

The conversation, I thought, was growing too exacting; not much longer should I be able to keep up my end of it—and then, there was that revolver, in the hands of what seemed to be a desperate man. A cloud was coming over the moon. I waited till it touched, then made a bolt. "Hurry up," I shouted, as I ran away, devoutly hoping that he would do nothing of the kind.

"This," I thought, "is clearly an island inhabited by criminals or madmen. Yet I haven't heard of any convict station nearer than New Caledonia. I give it up." I was almost back on the sea-beach by now; it occurred to me that I might as well shin up one of the palm-trees, and see whether there was really anything in this talk of a launch. I didn't think there was; my theory was rather that I had run across a particularly unpleasant kind of madman.

"No one but a lunatic," I argued, "would wear such clothes; and I daresay the talk about launches and thousands of pounds is only another phase of it. '*Folie des grandeurs*', they call that sort of thing."

THE palm I chose was tall, but bent with age; I had not much difficulty in wriggling my way up into the crown. The worst of it was the way in which the leaves kept hitting at me, driven by the wind—a blow from a twenty-foot palm front, ribbed with vegetable steel, is no trifle, and I had trouble in keeping clear. Up at last, and hanging precariously on to a mass of stems and flowers, I waited for clear moonlight, and made my survey.

"Gosh!" I exclaimed. There was undoubtedly a launch, if one may so designate a fine thirty or forty ton boat, schooner rigged, and fitted with an engine; well able to make the run to Valparaiso, or anywhere else, in competent hands. She was lying some way out at sea, on the leeward side of the island, beyond the inner lagoon. I could see a dinghy, like a little black water beetle, creeping landward from her side.

"That," I thought, "will be Black. I wonder what the two of them will make of it when they get together?" And the thought so intrigued me, that I fell to laughing, and nearly lost my hold.

But when I had got down safe to ground again, I was more than sobered by the thought that came almost immediately— "If what he said is true—if he has given a man called Black a thousand pounds, and expenses to run him out of this, there must have been dirty work somewhere, and I'm mixed up in it." I could not help remembering, somewhat unpleasantly, the remark about "five years on the breakwater."

Omega, I must tell you—but I will tell no more than I must—belongs to a non-British power, which has a short way with offenders against its rather Draconic code of laws. I didn't know what you could be sent to the breakwater for, but I knew there was one, in an out-of-the-way Omegan port, and I guessed that labor of the Portland Island kind, conducted under a tropical sun, was likely to be the kind of thing a wise man should avoid, at any cost.

Standing at the foot of the palm, with the windy warm moonlight night all about me, and never a soul but myself visible on all the long stretch of empty shore, I thought the matter out at length. I could arrive at only one conclusion. Whole knowledge was better than half. Whatever the risks might be of exploring yet further this odd, unpleasant place, it would be well for me to find out as much as possible, as soon as possible and (but that went without saying) get away as soon as possible afterward.

Once more I climbed the palm; swung out among the clashing stems among the swaying butts of the leaves, and looked for the launch. She was off, a long way out to sea, I saw her gliding, black in the silver path of the moon.

"Good," I thought, and slid down again. A few minutes' rapid walking found me once more among the little, sinister houses, with their horned gables and their air of being huddled together for some evil deed. The hut that had been lighted, was dark now. I lit a match, from the small reserve I always kept in a bottle, and looked in. No one was there. The place bore signs of hurried desertion—a stretcher bed overturned, with bedclothes flung on the ground; a cabin trunk gaping open, and gutted; piles of gray ash suggesting papers destroyed. I looked at the trunk to see if there was a name on it, or even a label; but it had been scraped bare, with the plain intent of leaving no trace behind.

In the middle of the floor lay a loincloth and a shirt of coarse cotton, bright yellow, with black spots as big as plates.

I stood in the doorway and looked, till my match burned out. I did not strike another. I walked away, and left the deserted hut to itself. And once more, mastering as a drug, and heavy as a dream, came over me that definite presage of ill.

In the little hollow there were fifteen other houses, all small and rudely built of bush material. I looked at them for a minute, swallowed in my throat—for something very like a fear had me—and then, thinking no longer, but driving myself as one used to do "over the top," in the hour after dawn, I found a coconut stump for a torch, lit it, and carried it, flaring furiously in the diminished wind, to the first of the houses.

The door was not shut. I held the torch above my head, and looked in. I looked for quite a long time at what I saw, making sure that I understood it, and that my eyes had not in any way misled me. Then, dashing out the torch against the ground, I fled for the sea—the clean sea. It seemed to me that to be drowned in that clean sea would be a fate a man needn't quarrel with—a fate ten thousand times better than the horror I had left behind.

The tide was down, and the cutter aground. I cannot tell with what anxiety I examined her. I would almost have set sail on a tree-trunk, if nothing else could be had—to get away.

Beyond all belief, I found the hull sound enough to float, with a bit of bailing. The mast was smashed, but I thought we could rig one up with the boom, setting the jib behind it. I went to look for Taviti; found him sleeping peaceably in his hole, and dragged him out by one leg.

"Hurry, Taviti," I urged. "The tide's on the turn, and we'll never get the boat down unless we catch it. She'll float. Come on."

"Ariki," he objected, "Me old, me hungerry, want to go look for some house I get kai-kai" (food).

THERE was nothing for it but a lie. I had already decided that Taviti should know nothing; what he did not know, he could not spread abroad.

"This is a desert island," I told him coolly. "No house, no garden. I think it's a bad place too—a place of ghosts" (and here I dropped into expressive island Maori). "There are ghost islands about Omega, aren't there?"

This was a snap shot, but I knew island ways. It hit the target.

"Yes, yes, Ariki," whimpered Taviti,

beginning to cringe. "Plenty ghost islands. Bad islands. Kaviri one bad island. Turi another. Raka, Lumeala—"

"Yes," I interrupted. "Do you know them all?"

"Me know one, two. No altogether."

"Do you know Turi?"

"Aiki, I dono him."

"Well, you know it now. This is Turi. Full of ghosts, up to the brim and spilling over. Let's get away, sharp. And you can pick a few coconuts to take along, if you're as hungry as all that. Not the coconuts on the ground, Taviti! . . . those are ghost coconuts. Get them off the tree."

We loaded the boat with nuts, and started work on the broken mast. I was mad to get away. It was not yet dawn, but the moon seemed paling, and I heard, among the palm tree tops inland, the first faint notes of waking parrakeets.

If — "They" — were to hear us — if "They" came out—my secret was lost. And I had some idea, by this time, as to how the power that owned Omega regarded people who poked inquisitive noses into secrets; how they might be likely to treat me, if I was caught.

The moon was still shining, the stars still to be seen, when we got the cutter afloat; but the eastern sky had begun to look as though a city, filled with light, lay somewhere just below the sweep of the horizon. From the salt lagoon in the distant middle of the island, came a long harsh call, rising and soaring above the tops of the trees—"Rawky! Rawky! Ra-a-awky!"—from sea-birds newly awake. It was truly time to go.

Taviti and I got the large fair weather jib set, with the gaff for boom, and got under way. In the new yellow dawn, a mile distant, I saw the island clearly—small, low, pricked with palms; one like a thousand others. And I judged that Taviti would never know he had not landed on Turi, after all.

Back again in Omega, I got charts, which I should undoubtedly have had before, and the sailing directions. I looked up the island on which I had so unwillingly landed. This was what our own Admiralty volume said about it—(latitude and longitude, and one or two other particulars, I omit)—"IOTA— . . . This island is the leper quarantine station for the Omega group. Serious penalties are attached to landing."

"Yes," I said, closing the book, "and I can add to that; getting a leper away from it—to Valparaiso or elsewhere—is five years on the breakwater."

ALL this I remembered, point by point, as I walked, beneath the mangoes of Daru, three thousand miles away from Omega in distance; years in point of time. I remembered it clearly, without omission, as if it had happened yesterday. And most clearly of all did I remember—now—the face of the man who wore the yellow dress with the black spots big as plates. Undoubtedly, it was the face of Sir Richard Fanshawe. Everything came back to me—the height of the man, his thinness, his chestnut hair and yellow-brown eyes, the slim, arched nose and neat chin; the lips, unusually red for a man's; the voice, peculiarly resounding and deep in tone; even the injured and deformed fingernail that I now remembered I had seen, as Sir Richard came up the ship's accomodation ladder, sliding one hand along the guard-rope. I was as sure as I was of my own existence, that Pia's fiancé was the leper who had, that night, escaped from Iota Island.

Not while I stayed in Omega—which was no longer than the call of the next boat—did any one discover what had happened. The power that owns Omega is quicker with punishment than prevention; it had determined to wipe out leprosy in the islands with a strong and unpitying hand, but it relied, seemingly, on fierce punishments for infraction of quarantine rules, rather than on a system of guards and preventatives that we, in their place, would certainly have set up. However, they raised enough dust about the matter when it was found out. Down in Auckland, I came upon a paper that related the daring escape from Iota of a "foreign speculator" named Fellows, who had been buying up certain commercial interests for his country, and who had, in the course of these affairs, deemed it necessary to take out papers transferring his nationality to the flag that waved over Omega. A luckless transfer! it placed him beneath the Omegan laws, and when a dramatic accident—the discovery of a seemingly harmless mark upon his body, when bathing—obliged him to go up to the local doctor for examination, he was sent without mercy to the quarantine island. There were those who hinted that

Fellows' recently acquired commercial interests had something to do with the case; that a big company was behind the doctor. Be that how it might, Fellows was sentenced to Iota, and, but for the daring rescue, would probably have spent the rest of his days there. They could not have been many. Any mistakes that had ever been made in sending suspects to the leper island, were but too likely to rectify themselves.

Fellows had been nine weeks on Iota. Nine weeks on an islet inhabited by the terrible things I had seen; an islet reeking with contagion, and innocent of any modern sanitary precaution whatever.

He might or might not have had the germ with him when he went there; but nothing was more probable than that he had taken it away with him, in any case.

Leprosy, I knew, could lie dormant for many years; might, when acquired, develop so slowly that the victim could live an ordinary life without being suspected, for a very long time. If Fellows was indeed Fanshawe—if he had gone to Omega to carry out a daring speculation in Omegan products, concealing his name and altering his nationality—a course that sounded very like what one had known of him in the war—then, the most horrible peril that can be conceived hung over Pia, and there was no one but myself to get her out of it.

Myself—with a hundred odd pounds of capital, no position and no reputation, save the unlucky one of being in love with her. Myself, against a rich and famous man, high placed in society, and approved by Pia's family—no doubt approved by the girl. Time against me, place against me, everything against me, save one thing—the fact that Fanshawe was coming to New Guinea.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS late before I ended that restless tramp beneath the mango trees, and thought of returning to my store. The night had turned to rain, as it so often does in Daru; my torch, when I snapped it on to see the way, shone on a myriad of crystal rods, dancing all over the road. The frogs had begun their nightly chant—"Port, port, port! Starboard, starboard!" In the near distance, among the mangroves of the beach, an alligator belled, as they do on these wet steamy nights. The sound had in it the essence of all savagery and loneliness. It made me realize, vividly, that I in my way was as savage and lonesome a creature as that mailed dragon down in the swamp; that I and civilization, cities, pleasures and amenities of life, had naught to do with one another. There was nothing apologetic in the thought; no sense of inferiority, which, I maintained, and still maintain, is not in the question.

Many a man born sailor, in body, bearing, and mind, of the sea and the sea only, unfitted for cities or society. I have not heard that any one thought the less of such men; wanted them to be that which they were not, and could not be; called them, contemptuously, rolling stones that bore no moss, or urged them to abandon sea life for a seat on somebody's office stool. Nor have I seen the farmer type despised, for similar reasons. But we others, we adventurerers who traverse trackless lands, instead of trackless waters; who look for the rough, the wild, in life, and are ready to pay for it when we find it; who discover the fields that others are to plough, the mines that others develop, the rivers that carry traffic for cunninger, smaller folk than ourselves—we are the bad lots; the relatives of whom smug families at home speak hopelessly, with shaken heads. We are the Ishmaels, the pariahs.

Unless, by chance, we drop, almost against our wills, against all our typical luck, into that "something good" that is the summit and the sum of life—according to the wise folk of the cities. Then, every one holds out the ready hand; then, a man's merits show clear as sun at noonday, though, before the lucky strike, he was but a crank and a dreamer.

I don't murder facts. It is the truth that many of us drink. I, for one, do not; but I can point you half a hundred better men than I, in all parts of the tropic world, who can not be trusted—long—in the neighborhood of a whisky bottle; many more who can not be trusted—in the presence of that still more dangerous intoxicant, a fair woman. What of it? They have their work to do, and they do it; work that, in many cases, would make the saints who condemn them turn pale, even to see. Imperfect tools we are, but with our blunt edges, and crooked handles, we are nevertheless carving out most of those slices of the world that still remain to be carved.

Between free-lances such as we, and commercial ordinary folk, stands a class that is neither one nor the other—government people. Not half enough has been written of the work done by government men, in countries such as Papua.

A hundred times I had thought this. For the hundred and first time I thought it, that night, beneath the dripping mango trees, with the alligator lifting up its moaning bellow, down in the swamps below. And I said to myself, with sudden resolve—"I'll go to Bassett; tell him the affair, and see what he says."

They were not yet gone to bed, in the Residency. I could see them from the roadway, Bassett's grave, ministerial face (he was the son of a well-known parson, and looked it); Northanger's narrow countenance, that was like the face of a schoolmaster, until you caught something strangely hard at the back of the blue eyes; Purchase, hair ruffled like the feathers of a hen, and features, as always, on the verge of a laugh, seeming to take the world, and his share of it, which was assuredly a hard one, very merrily indeed. Spicer was not to be seen; I was glad of it, for island houses offer small privacy, and I had that to say which would not pass with Fanshawe's friend. The others were not talking, not playing cards, not doing anything in particular except smoking, and quietly absorbing their usual, moderate amount of drink. They looked, in their fresh white shirts and pipe-clayed shoes, exceedingly clean, comfortable, and peaceful—enjoying for a few days, an oasis in the desert of hardships that made up their common lives.

Into the midst of this, I came, wet and bedraggled, and I make no doubt, looking like a last year's corpse. I could see the effect of my looks mirrored instantly in the faces about me; but nobody jumped up, or said— "My God, what's happened to you?" or "What's the row?" or any other silly thing, such as fellows elsewhere would certainly have thrown out at me. These fellows were not given to taking any circumstance in life other than quietly.

"WHERE'S Spicer?" I asked of Bassett. It did not occur to me to offer any explanation of my return, when I was supposed to be abed with fever; nor did anybody ask for one.

"Sit down. He went back to Maidstone's; he's staying there."

"Maidstone ask him?" queried Purchase.

"Not much. Nor his missus. He just came."

"They'll be too damned kind to him."

"Of course. They are. But I reckon Maidstone and she are about fed up with these wandering Christians who blow in from T. I. We'll do what we can to see they aren't worried any more." It was the government speaking here.

"If you could have kept that bird from landing altogether—"

"Oh, be reasonable, Perk; he has business. He's going to see to the recruiting end down here."

"Chance for you, Sheep," suggested Purchase. Recruiting labor was part of my trade.

Bassett gave me a keen look, and said nothing. I saw that he guessed there was more than recruiting in the wind.

Northanger got up. "I must be going," he said. "The missus will be sending a patrol after me. Ready, Purchase?"

If there was a hint, Purchase took it. They were gone in another minute, and Bassett and I were left alone in the austere, shiny parlor, with the rain shouting on the iron roof, and the steady chorus of the frogs rising up from overflowing ditches outside. "Port, port, port," they chanted. "Sherry, sherry. Star-board, star-board, port, port!"

Bassett, in his precise way, became busy. He brought out a suit of clothes neater and better mended than anything I possessed, if somewhat cheaper in kind—and handed it to me.

"You haven't a dry thread on you," he observed. "Better shift." He went off into the kitchen, and I heard him stirring up a sleeping boy; heard the clink of a kettle lid, the jingling of glasses. Bassett came back, looked at me, as I sat, fresh clad, and made no remark. The boy followed almost immediately with hot punch, and a quinine bottle. I helped myself to a share of both. It did not occur to me to thank Bassett for saving me from an attack of blackwater; somehow, one had a habit of taking things from him as a matter of course. He was so dry about it himself.

"I wanted to ask you something," I said.

"Yes," answered Bassett. It was a brief reply, but it carried a good deal; the tone, the look of Bassett's brown eyes, beneath his high ministerial-looking forehead, the settled attitude, hands crossed on knees, all suggested calm, reliability, and, what he must have known I desired above all things—as sick men consulting doctors, sinful men consulting priests, desire it—the professional attitude.

I HATE sympathy—sympathy, and pity, which I hold first cousin to scorn. Help's another thing; but I ask you who read, if it commonly goes with what the world knows as a sympathetic character? "Be sure and let me know if I can do anything," is what you get from that; a cold crust handed out with courtly smiles.

Bassett wasn't sympathetic. He just sat there, and waited to hear what I had to say. And I knew he would do anything that could be done.

I told him the whole thing. It was not easy to tell, because I had to bring Pia into it, and I found, to my intense digust, that my voice got unsteady when I spoke of her. Bassett did not appear to notice that. He listened quite to the end, in his magistrate-on-the-bench manner, making no comment. When he thought I had quite done, he came out, surprisingly, with—

"You are very much in love with this girl." It was not a question, it was a statement, made much as one's physician might offer a comment on the condition of one's lungs or liver.

"Am I?" I said stupidly. Something, at that moment, impelled me to get up and tramp the little parlor, end to end, like a wild beast tramping its den. Something had hold of me—I hardly knew what it was, but it shook me. What was the matter? Had I not agreed with myself that the wind which was Pia Laurier had blown through my life and passed away? To save her from marriage with one incredibly vile—that was a duty; but a duty that devolved on me merely as a man; not as the man who loved her. I had been so certain that I should not, therefore did not, love the girl with the black shingle and blue eyes; the girl who, even if she were ten times free, was not for me, wanderer, rolling stone, black sheep.

THINGS cleared in my brain. I sat down again. The thought that had come to me was nothing brilliant, nothing new; it was only this— "If I am hurt, I am hurt; well, then, I've got to stick it." I found it steadying, comforting even.

"It's not what you would call material to the evidence," I answered Bassett. "But you can take it so if you like."

"Very well. Do you know where her parents are?"

"Could find 'em, I suppose."

"The only thing to do is to tell them. Mind, they may not believe you. The story's thin, and I dare say they know you are gone on the girl yourself."

"The mother does, and she'd poison me if she could," was my reply. "What if the marriage is coming off immediately?"

"It couldn't," pointed out Bassett, "if he's going on this trip—but if you have any uneasiness on that point, you can go to Thursday Island and send a wireless."

"For all Australia to read!"

"Cross to Cape York and get the land line."

"I don't mind," said I thoughtfully, "if I do. You see—it may seem foolish, but I can't help fearing she might be attracted to the country. She's dead nuts on hearing about it."

"So many are," said the young magistrate, with a slightly weary air. Not much romance, I thought, remained about the rivers and head-hunters of Papua, for him.

"DON'T forget, Black Sheep," went on Bassett (and I knew by the nickname, that he wanted to say much he would certainly leave unsaid; much consolation for that which could not be helped or consoled). "Don't forget that there's such a thing as a law of libel; if you make mistakes, you may have to pay for them very dearly."

"I'll pay anything and everything," I said, rising. "I'll pay my life if I have to."

Bassett shook his sleek head, ever so little. "That's just the sort of thing—" he began, and stopped. "Amory," he went on, afresh. "You ought to be in the government. I've said so before and I say it again now."

"You have," I answered him, "and I've told you that I—can't."

"They'd take you."

"Maybe. But I'm not made for the collar."

"The collar," said Bassett softly, "is a part of double harness."

I WAS silent; he had hit me. I thought of others; of Northanger, who, despite his schoolmaster look, was at heart almost as much of a wild man as I. I saw, in fancy, that little home of Northanger's, not half a mile away—its daintiness, all in the midst of the western wilds; bright china, bright cretonnes, flowers, ferns, the thousand little nothings that make a home; the girl who lived there, and smilingly, bravely, wore her heart out in silence when Northanger was away playing the game of life and death in the unknown; the arms open to meet him when, thin, worn, ragged, he returned; the "desert made a paradise" by one. . . . I saw my store, my dangling cans and calicoes; my rough couch behind the counter, my table set with tins. The evenings—the endless hours from dark at half past six, till bedtime at nine. The nights, when sleep was but a name, and the frogs in the trenches, and the alligators in the swamp, boomed wicked choruses, telling one things not good to know.

Just for a moment I saw, in long perspective, all that I paid, was like to pay, for the sweet-bitter bread of freedom. To be like Bassett (who had a girl and a hope somewhere, I knew), like Northanger, married, blessed; like Purchase, who was the mischief of a flirt, but sure to settle, some day—men with a salary, small, certain; with honorable duties; with a pension ahead some day, with the Empire as master, and under the Empire, that modern paladin, Sir Robert Markham, Lieutenant Governer.

It would be well. It was well for these men, hard as were their lives. But— I was Amory, adventurer, black sheep; I could not, even if I would.

The subject dropped; was not picked up again.

"Thanks," I was saying to Bassett, who, I now saw, looked tired and a little worn; the hour was very late, and he had had a busy day. "Thanks. I'll do as you suggest. The soooner I can get to T. I.—"

There I stopped, halting, in the middle of my walk to the door. A sound had checked me.

"What was that?" I said to the R. M., in a low voice. The rain, for a little while, had slacked; the stillness, after the roar that had beaten on the roof all evening, was almost oppressive. A swamp pheasant, some way off, was pouring out bottle after bottle of imaginary water. "Bubble, bubble, bubble," went the sound. Then "Shish!" a half-choked sneeze.

It is the habit of the swamp pheasant to make these bubbling and sneezing noises. But I had thought I heard a noise, just under my feet, that was no swamp pheasant; a sneeze—suppressed, yet audible—not coming from outside.

We stood, two figures turned to stone, and listened. I don't know what Bassett thought I had heard; maybe the beginning of a revolt among the man-eater and murderer prisoners, lightly confined in a wooden jail some few score yards away; maybe the movements of some half-crazed native, oppressed with the strange Valhalla madness that has filled a few hurried graves, in Papua's West. The pheasant went on bubbling and sneezing; the frogs chanted. Somebody's pet hornbill, on the roof, began sliding noisily down from ridge to gutter; climbed up and did it again.

"There's nobody," said Bassett.

I DID not answer him. I made a dart for the steps, down them, under the house, where eight foot high piles made a little forest of darkness and secrecy, beneath the Residency floors. There was nobody there. But in the garden, the peering water-logged moon showed me a spray or two of the hibiscus hedge in sudden, agitated motion.

I jumped the hedge, and came down unexpectedly on something large and dusky, that heaved beneath my feet, and threw me off, as a bucking outlaw throws its rider; I fell, recovered myself, and saw, down the croton avenue, a man running away. He was tall and thin, and he ran in a flat-footed, heavy, plunking manner that instantly suggested to me two large, flat feet I had seen earlier in the evening.

"Spicer!" I said to myself, and gave chase.

I am a good runner, but a stern chase is proverbially a long one, and the croton and mango avenues of Daru, on a darkish night, give excellent scope to the pursued. Moreover, it had begun to rain again, the paths were slippery, and the crash of falling water on drenched and down-beaten leaves, made noise enough to cover any retreat. Using my torch, I caught a glimpse of the fugitive, lost him, thought I saw him again, and finally pulled up on the beach road, near Madistone's, alone.

WE AREN'T formal, in Papua. I went and knocked up Maidstone. It was some time before he heard me, but he came forth at last, a thin, middle-aged man with a kindly, worthy face, peering, by the light of his hurricane lamp, out into the relentless rain. "Who's sick?" was his first query. "Who is it?"

"Amory," I answered. "Nobody sick. Is your boarder in?"

"He's not a boarder, we don't take boarders," was Maidstone's answer. "If you mean the nut who blew in today, he's in bed."

"Sure?"

Maidstone disappeared. "Well, now, it's a queer thing," he commented, coming back and standing, an odd, pyjama'd figure, on the soaked veranda boards, which reflected his bare feet like ice. "He's not there— Eh, what are you damning him for? What's he done?"

"I don't know what he *hasn't* done," I answered, furiously, for now I was almost sure that this Spicer, the creature of Fanshawe, had overheard every word I said to Bassett. "Break his neck when he comes in, or chuck him to the alligators; it's the best thing you can do with him."

"Well, now, the wife wouldn't like any rudeness," answered Maidstone placidly. "I suppose he's got a right to go in the house, or out of the house, as he likes. You go back to your store, Phil Amory; you'd ought to be in bed. Good night."

I did not go to bed. I went back to Bassett's. That long-suffering official had not yet turned in; I could see him walking about the house with a lamp.

"Bassett," I said, bolting up the staircase. "That sneak of a Spicer chap was underneath the house."

"You go to bed, Amory, and let other people go," he answered. "You're fanciful. I heard nothing but a swamp pheasant."

"I saw him, I tell you," was my angry response. "Running away among the mangoes. And Maidstone said he wasn't there."

"Tackle him yourself tomorrow morning," counselled Bassett. "Aren't you going to let any one on the island go to sleep? Be off, Black Sheep, or I'll arrest you."

"I can tell you this," was my parting shot, "there's no power in Papua will get me to Thursday Island now."

Nevertheless, when morning came, I began to think differently.

I WENT up to Maidstone's early. Spicer was lounging on the veranda, in Mrs. Maidstone's special chair, with a tin of Maidstone's special cigarets at his elbow. Maidstone's boy was busy fetching him matches, soda water, another cushion for his head, a magazine to read. Mrs. Maidstone, in the background, was flying about, busy and energetic as usual. Slim, blue-eyed, pretty in a belated schoolgirl sort of fashion, this middle-aged woman of the outback was a constant wonder to me. She had seen and done almost all that the hardest cases in west Papua had seen and done—run risks, in earlier days, that made one's heart stand still to think of; nursed many a man through accident or fever; laid out and dressed for burial some of them.

She had faced cannibals with a toy revolver; had more than once been shipwrecked; had starved and been thirsty, had suffered risk and loneliness in the little store when her husband was away, but bravely carried on his business for him, here and up the scarce-visited, terrible rivers of the mainland. She had shared her precious loaves of bread with any who needed—and let those who have lived long beyond reach of civilization, tell what that may mean; how dearly our "daily bread" may be valued, when it is no longer daily, or sure.

She had often taken in houseless strangers, until the small profits of the store were eaten into almost beyond bearing. She had lived hard, and known no luxury, for years; faced danger like a man, and done a woman's work. Withal, she was the merriest thing in western Papua, and, but for a line or two, and a gray hair or two, you might have given her five-and-twenty years. . . . I think we bachelors were all a little bit in love with Mary Maidstone. It did us no harm, and did her less than none. And I think Maidstone, in his own language, would have been somewhat "marked," if any one had failed to appreciate her to the full.

Spicer, I reckoned, had been paying for his keep in the coin commonly used by such as he; flattery; "manner," such as well-bred folk are supposed to use (and happily do not) the mention, dazzling to Australians, of many titled people. I dare say that the Maidstones, though not liking him—they were too simple and honest for that—had been to some extent dazzled, hypnotised, by his well-worn and well practised airs.

I jumped straight into the heart of things, which habit is one of my most incurable faults. But what! life is short—I'd rather jump into now and then a hidden swamp, than spend days painfully walking round dusty roads.

"Do you mind telling me," I said, "what you were doing under the R. M.'s house last night?"

I expected a plain denial, more or less angry. But Spicer was too clever for that.

"Oh, come now," he answered, with a man-of-the-world air, and something like a wink. "You can't expect me to give an account of my wanderings about this very fascinating island, after dark. No, Black Sheep, I can't let you baa-baa at me; leave that to the missionaries."

I could have knocked him off the veranda, with the utmost satisfaction; I am not sure that I shouldn't have done it, in spite of Mrs. Maidstone's presence, if something had not told me to move carefully, keep a lookout for red herrings trailed across the track.

"My name is Amory," I said. "What were you doing?"

He made as if to dig me in the ribs with a white, splayed forefinger; I think the look in my eyes made him draw it back, for never, without actually doing it, was I nearer to smashing in any man's face, in my life.

"Naughty, naughty," was what he said. "Ladies present."

Mrs. Maidstone—I don't know how—managed to melt away. She gave me a look of warning as she did so. Mary Maidstone, God bless her, and her kindly, shrewd old boy of a husband, seemed to go about Daru under the impression that I, Phil Amory, a reasonable chap enough, was actually the most dangerous of explosives.

I proceeded to prove that assumption false, by going on with my investigation.

"Really," I said, "I have my reasons, which I dare say—" (for I was beginning to think he hadn't heard anything) "you know nothing about. I saw you, if not under the house, certainly close to the R. M.'s in the middle of last night, and when I chased you, you ran away."

"You bet I did," said Spicer with a giggle. "Thought you were the enraged husband, for a fiver."

"Bassett isn't married," I told him.

"The warder is," he sniggered. "Very pretty wife, too."

Now this bewildered me, for I did know Taluna, the wife of the native warder, and I had seen her, only a week before, brought up in court by her husband, in connection with a charge of "stealing" her, which he was making against another native. Taluna was no saint; and for a Papuan, she was unusually good-looking. It was also true that the warder's house was within a stone's throw of the place where I had tumbled over Spicer.

I didn't know what to think. Mrs. Maidstone came back at that moment, with a tray of glasses, interrupting—I fancied, deliberately—the conference. She offered us whisky; I took two fingers of it; Spicer took some more soda-water. It added to my dislike of him. I have always held that there's as likely as not to be something wrong about either a teetotaller or a non-smoker; if not wrong, half-baked. Granted, that there are exceptions. Spicer I did not take to be an exception.

I KNEW that Bassett thought I had been wrong in supposing Spicer to be listening under the house. I knew, too, what he did not tell me—that a man who is overwrought, excited, and begins to fancy himself spied upon may be in rather a bad way. Perhaps it was Mary Maidstone who gave the final stroke to my suspicions.

"Are you two done quarrelling?" she asked gaily, as I put away the tray that I had taken from her hands. (Spicer, for all his manners, had allowed her to serve him, sitting). "And if you are, can I ask you, Phil, when you're going across again? I want you to do me an errand."

"Across," meant the trip of one hundred and twenty miles, from this near point of Papua, to Australia.

"It depends," I answered her, "on Mr. Spicer."

"How, on me?" asked Spicer brusquely. If he did not say "my good man" his tone suggested that unpardonable form of address.

"I heard," I answered him evenly, "that you wanted a number of boys recruited. I have a good cutter and know the villages. I'd be glad to make you a price."

("If he heard me," my thought ran, "if he knows that I'm off as fast as I can go to put a spoke in Fanshawe's wheel, he'll try and keep me here; nothing simpler.")

But Spicer, it seemed, did not want me to stay.

"There's no hurry," he said patronizingly. "Take your time. I shall stay here another three weeks," (I saw Mary Maidstone make a face of dismay, behind his back) "I'm waiting for the Papuan chief to bring the rest of the members of the expedition along. Of course I am leader, next to Sir Richard, and I have all the organizing in my hands. I shall have to see to the stores, with the help of our good friends the Maidstones. If you want to run across, don't mind me. Thursday Island—'Thirsty Island'—every one knows it." He laughed rudely, and looked at my emptied glass.

Now, I am not a drinking man, if I do once in a way shift a glass before the sun's over the yard. I felt, once again, exceedingly inclined to pick a quarrel with this Spicer; onc again, remembered that I could not afford to do so, if I wished to make sure of certain things.

"Very well," I said, watching his face. "I'll start across today—anchor at Cap, and get in early tomorrow. Mrs. Maidstone, if you've any commissions, I'll be delighted to attend to them."

"Right you are," answered my hostess cheerfully, with something of her gay schoolgirl manner coming back. "Just a sec, and I'll give you my list." She went off into the store, and Spicer, who had not altered by so much as a line the expression of his large, flat countenance, took the cigaret out of his mouth to remark—"Good trip to you." It was a dismissal, somewhat in the royal manner. I held myself in from answering him as I wished, and followed Mary Maidstone.

HOTELS on Thursday Island — of which there is a surprising number — are never the same, twice visited. Proprietors, managers and manageresses, vary almost as the seasons go. Nothing remains constant but the flat blue sea, blowing palms, red-dusty roads, outside the verandas, goats grazing on paper, bottles and tins, about the steps; within, long passages through which the winds howl ceaselessly, rooms more or less fallen to ruin, strange relics, every here and there, of Thursday's long past pearling glories, in the shape of costly furniture marooned among packing case rubbish, railings and banisters worth a little fortune, if any cared to buy; huge dark mirrors circled with the broken shards of crystalline Venice flowers. . . .

The Grand Cosmopolis, where I put up, looked much as usual; there were goats underneath it, goats on the steps, a bawling kid or two clattering woodenly over the veranda boards, while its mother, held off by a wire fence, answered it with screams. Within, there was a desolate big dining-room, with a pilot eating his lunch, slowly and contentiously, as pilots do, alone.

Nobody in the bar. Nobody on the dusk staircase. All gone out to a picnic probably and the barman asleep. I found my usual room, and dumped my gear in it; walked round the echoing veranda, with a wary eye for ant-eaten boards; peeped into the pilot's room, and had about made up my mind that there was nobody here save myself and he, when I heard voices in the upstairs parlor. A man and a woman, talking.

"Gin-Sling, for a ducat," I said to myself. "Now what on earth—?

I did not mean to listen; but standing there in the dusk of the staircase, uncertain whether to go on or go back, I caught a sentence or two, before it became clear to me that, up or down, I must move on.

". . . Off that infernal ship. Of course you will, Jinny. You don't expect me to believe you missed the boat by accident?"

"Missed it for a lark."

"You didn't miss it for a lark—Genevieve. If you didn't miss it for me, you missed it for some one else."

Jinny's reply was tuneful, irrelevant, and chiefly concerned with the unluckily comic love adventures of a "coon in Alabam."

Then the other person, the man, said something that woke me up.

"Where," he asked, with a sudden rasp in his voice, "is the beach-comber fellow who picked you out of the sea?"

"At the bottom of it, for all I know," answered Gin-Sling, immediately abandoning her song for another.

"Yes, we have no beach-combers,"

"We have no beach-combers today."

"Jinny, you're enough to—" That was

all I heard. Conscious that I had already listened too long for decency, I hurried down the rubber carpeted stairs, and out into the desolate back street behind the hotel. Under an immense old frangipanni, in a litter of dust and bones and papers and fallen flowers, I stood to light a cigaret, at the same time watching the door of the sitting-room, which was clearly visible from below. I wanted to see who would come out. I had half guessed already.

Yes. It was Sir Richard Fanshawe's figure, thin and tall, that stalked out presently from the dusk doorway, followed by that other tall, thin figure that was Jinny. "They're like," I thought. "Ginger hair, brown eyes, same build, both of them, outlaw character, both. Not related physically, but mentally, they're cousins. Only I'll say this for her, that she is not, within streets, as bad as he."

FROM what I had heard, I guessed that Fanshawe had left the ship at some intermediate port, and that Jinny, at the same port, had—accidentally, or purposely—abandoned her passage, and stayed behind.

She and Fanshawe had returned Australia-wards in the same ship; had disembarked at Thursday Island—I didn't quite see why, but that could pass—and were staying at the Cosmopolis Grand. Fanshawe, clearly, was making light love to her; she did not favor his suit, and he was inclined to blame me for the rebuff. Thought she was "gone" on me. Imagined (owing to the gossip he had no doubt heard on the ship) that she had abandoned her voyage and her contract, and headed back toward Papua—because of me. That was the situation, as I sized it up. Well, it might be flattering, but I didn't see it as he did. Jinny I took to be the sort of person who might have a dozen reasons, or no reason, for anything she did. Perhaps I was one of the dozen reasons, perhaps not. In any case, it didn't greatly matter.

While I was pondering these things, no less a person than Sir Richard himself came down the steps of the hotel. He seemed to be in something of a hurry; he went quickly, without looking to right or left. I was clear in his way, but he scarcely brushed me with his glance, as he passed. In that instant, I realized, what indeed I might have known before, that, to Pia's fiancé, I was nothing more than a name. I had seen him on the ship, but he had not—consciously—seen me. "Just as well," I thought, though I could not have told why.

The sight of him, busy and purposeful about I knew not what, reminded me that my telegram was still unsent. I went up to my room to concoct it; but I had scarcely got out pencil and paper, leaning over my suitcase with back to the door, when I was suddenly and not disagreeably blinded by two long cool hands that closed, without warning, over my eyes.

"Guess who," said Jinny's voice, with Jinny's own unmistakable chuckle in it.

"The prettiest girl in the Pacific," I answered, pulling down her hands, and twisting her face till it met mine. There seemed no reason—now—why I should not kiss this Jinny, and I did, with thoroughness. I had not wanted to kiss her on the boat, when the vision of Pia Laurier was still gilded with the light of not impossible future hopes. Now. . . . What did it matter?

Let Pia marry, or not marry, whom she listed; there was always the mangrove wall, and what it signified to stand between us two.

Besides one couldn't forget that fellow in the corner room. I won't deny that his presence gave keen sauce to the kisses.

Jinny broke away from me; she was flushed, and laughing. I thought I had never seen her so pretty. I ran to fetch her a chair.

"Now come and tell me what it's all about?" I said. "Why aren't you delighting the smart folk of Singapore, and why isn't Sir Richard Fanshawe—well, why is he here, anyhow? I don't mean why is he with you; that's his luck—but what the deuce do the two of you want in this dead dustheap of a place?"

Jinny settled herself purringly in the hammock chair like a slim kitten that curls itself on a pillow. Her eyes were half closed; she looked beneath long lashes, heavy with paint, and across the plain of Scilla-blue sea, and the far-out fairy isles of Tuesday and Wednesday, and the purple crags of Prince of Wales and Horn. I think, so looking, she saw none of these things, nor yet the sky with galloping trade-wind clouds, nor the near palm-tree tops, that almost blew across the rail beside us. I think that she saw only rough Phil Amory, called Black Sheep, and the day for her, ran filled with shining gold.

THERE'S time for thinking, in the lands where black sheep live. Since then I have wondered how things might have gone; what my life, and that of another, might have been, had there been no Pia Laurier on the steamer. If there had been just Jinny Treacher, Jinny whom I had saved at the near risk of my own life; Jinny who gave me—I know—that which she never gave to any one else—

I think I might have held her—God knows, who made us both. I think I might have looked into the faces of her children and never wondered—feared—I say I think. I do not know. There's the curse of the Jinny Treachers. About the one thing that matters, in the end, more than anything else—the children—you want to be sure. Sam Johnson put it brusquely, but well, when he said (I quote from memory) "Sir, a man wants to know that he is not leaving his property to the son of another."

Of course, I did not think all this while sitting beside Jinny in the shade and sun of blessed Thursday Island—blessed in its golden climate, if in nothing else. When you were with Jinny, you thought of her; she saw to that. She was a merry devil, and she made you merry too. It was quite a little while before I found a chance to put my question to her again—somehow, nothing outside Thursday seemed as important as it had been, before those two long hands closed over my eyes.

"What am I doing?" she answered lightly. "Missed me boat in Sourabaya, stuffin' rice-table at the Oranje. Fanshawe was there gorgin' himself too; he was booked for Sourabaya—oil business of some kind—and he lent me my fare back to Sydney. There was a boat next day, and I thought I'd get away from him by taking it, but spare me days, that wasn't his idea; he saw his man and did his business and got away in twenty-four hours, along with me. And when I got off here, he got off, so that's that."

"He got off, "I said, "because he's going across to Papua; he has one of his exploring trips on."

She nodded. "I know; he told me. He's heard something about it that he didn't like, this morning; he got fair snake-headed when his letters came along in some little boat. I wouldn't have had a chance of this yarn with you, only that he went off for the telegraph office as soon as he'd read the letters. When he's here, he's all over the place like a pig in a fair."

I answered her nothing at all—silenced by a new and unpleasant thought. I had brought over a government mail-bag in the cutter, as one usually did when crossing to T. I. What was in it? Who from Daru, had been writing to Sir Richard Fanshawe?

Spicer's cool indifference to my departure was easily comprehensible, if he had obtained, through that very circumstance, the chance of warning Sir Richard against myself and my ugly knowledge. It was no news to him, I dare say; he seemed to be Sir Richard's creature through and through.

Over these thoughts I sat glooming and worrying, till Jinny noticed the sudden drop in temperature, and began to tease. Then I roused myself. She must be in Fanshawe's confidence, more or less, I thought; it wouldn't do to set that keen mind of hers to work. I kissed her again, with no one but the goats to look on, and then jumped up and declared my intention of going out on business. What I meant to do was to sail my boat over to Cape York, and send my message—now more than ever necessary—by land line. The address of Pia Laurier's father was easily found; I knew where I could get a directory and year book of "Prominent Australians."

FIRST, however, I went to the post-office. I had to wait a little; somebody, inside, was busy telephoning a message to Cape York after the strange local fashion—words spelt out letter by letter, with a Christian name for each, to avoid blunders. Mechanically, as I leaned on the counter, I began taking up the message, which seemed public for all the world to hear—

". . . P for Peter, L for Laura, E for Emily, A for Alice, S for Samuel, E for Emily, D for Dora. . . . T for Thomas, O for Oliver. . . . H for Harry, A for Alice, V for Victoria, E for Emily. . . ."

Somebody was "pleased to have" something. Waiting, I listened; I was really not conscious of eavesdropping; what was chiefly on my mind at the time was the bare possibility of a letter from Pia.

"Pleased to have you join," the message slowly ran. "Prospector failed us. See letter March." And then a word that waked me up like a shock from a live wire—"Re Tatatata."

The operator boggled at that; didn't think it right; tried again, and asked if it was a code word. Finally he spelt it out more or less under protest, as "T for Thomas, A for Alice, T for Terence, A for Ann, T for Timothy, A for Amelia, T for Teresa, A for Alfred."

If I had any scruples about listening (and really, one doesn't or oughtn't to listen), I had none now. "Tatatata—" the word so clearly Papuan, to any one who knew the country, the odd, distinctive word, not readily forgotten, was the keyword to the secret that I had, for almost a year, been cherishing; the secret that I had thought mine only.

Where, in the name of everything that was improbable, had Fanshawe got hold of that word, and the fact it connoted? Could a man keep nothing to himself, even though he locked his lips and reined in his very thoughts? (I had been near telling the whole thing to Pia Laurier, but that did not seem to matter, since I had not really told; I was ready to credit myself with the virtue of reserve unflawed).

The message ended, abruptly with "F"—sent over the wire by the patient operator as "F for Fanny." "Pretty near right," I commented to myself. "If I don't make a very bad guess— And now, what's next? I'd better think this out before I do anything."

The clerk came forward, and told me there were no letters. I hadn't expected any, so it was unreasonable for me to feel—as I did—exceedingly disappointed. I took myself and my disappointment out into the yellow sun and flying winds, walked down a wide main street that had nothing on it save myself, a Chinese storekeeper, a heap of rubbish, and half a herd of goats, it was a good place to think in peace—the middle of the main street of that town, at ten in the morning. Nothing to interfere with the calm flow of thought, unless one excepts the sudden passage, running wildly at nine miles an hour, of Thursday's sole taxi, a hybrid of the year nineteen-seven, occupied by the driver, one colored man, and a calf.

I CAME to the conclusion that my telegram had better go in any case and that after that, the sooner I set sail for Daru again, the sooner I got my gear together, and started off on my trip to the interior, the better. I hadn't money enough for all that was wanted—well, I would get Maidstone to "grub-stake" me, much though it went against my pride. I hadn't a mate to go with me; any man I could trust was sure to be in some un-get-able place. Well, I would take the risk of going alone with my boys. Anything, sooner than let Fanshawe (I stopped in the middle of the street to give him a good cursing) get ahead of me with what I fancied to be the biggest find ever made in Papua.

Now that I raked my mind through and through, now that I squeezed the last drop out of every recollection that could help me, I was able to make a rough guess at the possible source of Fanshawe's information. And, like most mysteries, it turned out to be simple enough when explained. The fiancée of the dead miner had been, not a girl, but a widow. Her name, as I had heard it, was Brownrigg. Straining my memory, I seemed to recall something about her maiden name; and if I did not mistake, that name was the fairly common but in this case, most significant one, of Fanshawe.

The miner perhaps had talked to Mrs. Brownrigg more than one had supposed. Mrs. Brownrigg perhaps had talked to her relative, (if indeed he was her relative) Sir Richard Fanshawe, the great man of a very mediocre family. I didn't see that I was ever likely to know, the exact circumstances, and perhaps they did not matter. One thing did matter, and that was that a man who signed his telegrams "F", who was, almost certainly Fanshawe himself, was inviting some prospector to join an exploring party; using, in the message, the name of the point where Grace's trip, years ago, had ended.

If I had cursed Fanshawe before, I cursed myself now. Couldn't I have known that a find of the magnitude I suspected was not likely to remain secret, even if every man connected with the trip was dead, and I only in possession of the sole written record? Might I not have guessed that what had happened in the case of Pia Laurier and myself, had also happened in the case of the miner and his girl? This young widow, for all I knew, might have been as fascinating to Grace as Pia was to me. It appeared that she had been; the more I thought of it all, the surer I was that Mrs. Brownrigg, before her death, had told somebody about Tatatata; and in order to do that, she must have got it out of Grace. Lord knows, it was sensational enough.

WELL then! what then! The chain of logic was too clear to miss. It looked as if fortune had delivered Richard Fanshawe into my hand; as if opportunity were there, ready and waiting, for a very satisfying revenge. He was certainly fond of Genevieve Treacher, or he would not have taken the risk of spoiling his chances with Pia, by running off with Gin-Sling. She, I made no doubt, could do anything with him that she chose. She would do anything for me—find out anything—if I lifted my finger.

I won't deny that I was tempted. I walked the streets of Thursday for quite a while—those weird streets, wide and empty, with blue sea winking at the end of every one, and an air about the sun-scarred, ant-eaten houses as if the inhabitants were all gone off on a boat picnic, but might be expected back again, any time almost. I wouldn't go back to the hotel—not, at least, until I had made up my mind.

Minds are queer things; they stand apart from the thing that is yourself; you argue, suffer defeat. . . . "Body, soul and spirit," not a bad definition, the old one, after all.

Minds are illogical; they make small trouble about swallowing camels, then balk at something less than a sparrow. They give you free rein to a certain point, then, for no comprehensible reason, draw the sharpest of dividing lines, just there. I don't know why I, Phil Amory, black sheep, who had just been listening to a private telegram, and planning to act on knowledge thus discreditably acquired, should have decided, suddenly and irrevocably, that I would not do the thing I had been tempted to do, in the matter of Jinny and her lover.

"It's a dirty trick," I said to myself, and shook the thought away.

Jinny was not to be seen when I got back to the hotel. I could hear her, though, in one of her wild fits of merriment, amusing Fanshawe by what seemed to be a vivid imitation of two cats fighting two dogs, and an old lady screaming through it all. As Jinny did the thing, it was incredibly funny. You forgot that the cruel destruction of a lonely old granny's pets before her eyes would not, in real life, be laughable, except to savages. Jinny could have staged a bull-fight or an execution for you, and you would have roared right through. I have seen her reduce a room to tears—not of melancholy—by impersonating, first the corpse, and then the parson, at a funeral.

I knew she would be looking for me, later on. I knew I should find her at my corner of the veranda, when the great moon of Torres began to sail like a golden galleon among the palm-tree tops, and the straits and islands were veiled in fiery blue. I knew what the magic of Thursday—for Thursday is magic, still, despite all aging and decay—would do for me and for her. And I thought of that little head, with its close casque of shining hair so very far away. And I took my gear from my room, and marched down to the beach below, where the cutter, out in green water, was swaying with the tides.

Night found me at Cape York, with my telegram ready to send.

CHAPTER V

I HAVE never had a harder task in my life than the framing of that telegram. To say enough, and not too much—to influence Pia's unknown father, by a dozen words wired across a continent, so that he should exert himself to break, or postpone, his daughter's marriage—to show authority for what I counseled, and at the same time conceal the vivid personal interest that had prompted the sending of the message—this I found, in its entirety, more than I could manage. There was no doing the thing well; to do it somehow, anyhow, was all that I could expect.

This was what I produced, in the end, for the frankly interested clerks to despatch by land line from the Cape—no telephone transmission for me!

Joseph Laurier
Laurier Downs Station,
New South Wales

Serious reasons existing against Fanshawe marriage most strongly advise awaiting mail for necessary inquiries cannot sufficiently emphasize necessity delay.

And I signed my name, my insignificant, unknown name, in full — Philip Cosgrove

Amory. Laurier would not know Philip Cosgrove Amory from Adam, but that was perhaps something to the good—all things considered. He would be bound in common prudence to wait the arrival of my letter before giving judgment on the matter. I had done the best I could with the letter; it contained a plain statement of the occurrences on Iota Island, mentioned the fact of my acquaintance with Miss Laurier, and so concluded. No apologies—either the thing was unforgivable, or it was a service beyond all thanks. No attempt to make capital, on my own account, of the circumstances that had brought me into communication with Pia's family. Just the facts, no more.

I sealed, registered and posted the letter, and put to sea again, with a lightened heart. So far as I knew, there was no reason for haste; but nevertheless, instinct warned me that Fanshawe would try to hurry matters. Well, I had done the best I could, and given time, I could make sure that this unspeakable brute would never place a ring on Pia's finger. As to what might happen to myself, I made no guesses. Like so many men in similar case, I thought I could be content not to have her, not to drag her down to my own hazardous level, if only I might be sure that no one else would take my place.

I daresay it never occurred to me that there were other men in the spacious world of the Lauriers on whom Miss Laurier might be persuaded to smile—if I and Fanshawe were dead and buried tomorrow. I daresay I didn't think that Pia, with her beauty, her indescribable soft sweetness and charm, so intriguingly linked to the daring of a Britomarte, was not the girl to weep her life away under a willow, even if she wished that, simply, she wouldn't be let. I pictured her remaining an eternal maiden, never of course developing into an old maid, for my sake, and was quite well pleased. If any one had told me that Pia's hair, some time about nineteen-forty, would certainly be not only grayish, but thinnish; that in nineteen fifty, she would have lines running down from nose to chin, and a slightly mottled complexion; that in those days, her figure of a "Wingless Victory" would probably be thick about the waist, and her shoes a size larger than they were today—I think I should have struck him to earth for his blasphemy.

WELL, I sailed back to T. I. late, and all in the dark. And I suppose I was tired, after the long day and its many emotions. I had a theory that I never was tired; it seemed to me a disgraceful condition, fit only for dotards of forty, so I never allowed that it had touched, or could touch, myself. But the laws of nature took no heed of my feelings, and that night they had their revenge. I fell half asleep at the tiller, rammed the jetty, and was tumbled down into the hold, before my boy could catch me. He picked me up instantly, but the careless moment had done its work. I had a badly cut head and concussion of the brain; and it was my unlucky fate, in consequence, to spend the next two weeks in Thursday Island hospital.

I cannot tell how tiresome, maddening, I found the resultant confinement and delay; but I daresay the hospital staff could have told, for I was a bad patient, always wanting steamer time tables and shipping reports, and studying them to the detriment of my temperature; always demanding to have the bandages taken off my head, and to be let go, always being told what the consequences would be, and disbelieving and damning the consequences. It was worst toward the end of the third wretched week, for then, I had calculated a reply by letter might reach me, from Laurier Downs. None did, nor was there any telegram. The silence remained unbroken.

Afterward I heard what had happened, and—as one always does—wondered why I couldn't have guessed it at the time. Nobody had died, as I frantically assumed. Nobody had treated me with silent contempt. Nothing had fallen into the hands of Fanshawe, or his "*ame damnée*," Spicer—though I had guessed at all these solutions of the mystery. It was simply that Joseph Laurier was in England, not at home, and that my letter, marked "Private," and carefully sealed, had of course been sent on after him, instead of being opened by his secretary. The telegram had also been posted on; over that, the secretary had used what he was pleased to call his judgment, and decided, apparently, that he was less likely to risk losing his billet by sending my extraordinary and unconvincing wire under cover, than by hanging the Lauriers' dirty linen out over the cable lines of the world.

Hence, the silence, which made me realize, before long, that I might have done better to address both letter and wire to Mrs. Laurier. But there also, lions stood in the way. Would Mrs. Laurier believe anything I said on such a subject—I, a rather disreputable stranger, obviously jealous of the distinguished, wealthy party she had secured for her daughter? She might go so far as to lay my letter before Sir Richard. What would be the result? I didn't know, but I could guess that Sir Richard would make short work of it. Whether he knew, or did not know, himself to be unfit for all society save that of the wretches on Iota Island, he was clearly resolved to drive ahead. He could laugh me out of court—bring a hundred proofs, bought or manufactured, that he wasn't, couldn't be the man I had seen. Was I sure myself? Bassett had not been at all sure, he had pointed out to me, among other things, that a damaged little finger nail could not be relied on, as any sort of serious proof, since nothing was more common than accidents to the little finger. "Look," he had said, holding up his own left little finger, "that's been pinched in a door; you can see the mark—and there's another fellow in the division that I can think of who has the same sort of mark; Garfield; he hit his with a mallet."

"Yes," I had told him, "but have you ever read the 'Murder of Marie Roget?'"

"I have," answered Bassett, "and I see your point; the increasing value of each coincidence; still your coincidences don't quite satisfy me."

Was I not then sure? "By heaven, I am," I swore to myself, lying there on my hospital lounge, with the blue, island-jeweled seas of Thursday smiling at me beyond the veranda roof, maddening and desirable, unattainable too, as Pia Laurier herself. "Proof or no proof, I would swear it on my dying bed."

The nurse's white frock came speeding along my veranda.

"THERE'S a lady to see you," she said, bringing up beside the lounge. "Matron says she may come. She's called to inquire before, but she wouldn't come in. She's asked to come in today."

I did not ask the lady's name; I thought I knew it. When Jinny Treacher, tall and thin, but graceful, like Trilby, in her very bones, appeared at the veranda's end, I knew my guess was right. More than that—I knew Sir Richard Fanshawe was gone.

During my imprisonment, my only consolation had been the fact that he was still close at hand. This I had taken pains to ascertain; to check up, day by day. I don't know what the hospital folk can have thought of my constant messages by telephone to the Cosmopolis Grand Hotel, where I had a good friend in the person of the half-caste porter; of the entire absence of any return inquiries from Sir Richard. I daresay they were accustomed to any sort of idiocy on the part of patients, and not very much interested in the idiocies of just one more.

But Jinny's presence, Jinny's visit, I knew, meant that she was, according to her own lights, free; that she could call on me with a clear conscience. She was, in her pale muslin dress, with her wonderful fluffy red hair peering under a black hat, the prettiest, most disturbing thing that could have entered the chaste wards of that hospital for many a day. Her very walk, the dancer's walk, seemed to scatter sunshine about her, her eyes, brown eyes with a candle lit behind them, shot merry signals, in passing, at the eyes of the men lying or lounging on the long veranda, and were answered, I could swear, by a spark from every one. I could have sworn, too, that every one in sight envied me when Jinny checked her floating walk beside my lounge, dropped into a chair, and crossing her yellow silk-stockinged knees with an air of entire comfort, asked me how I was.

I told her, briefly and, I think, untruthfully. I was anxious to get to the reason for her call. That she had not come for the sole purpose of looking at Black Sheep, I knew as well as if she had told me. But it seemed hard for her to begin. She glanced at me sidewise over the big black fan she carried—one of Jinny's most potent weapons, that fan—chattered like a pretty, painted parrakeet, asked fifty questions about the nurses and the doctors and the conduct of the place generally, didn't wait for an answer to any one. At last, losing patience—I was not patient in those days—I asked her point-blank what she had come to tell me. Perhaps I sugared the question with the kind of compliments Jinny expected; I hope I did. At any rate, she became suddenly serious, furled her fan, and gave me a look that said, as plain as ever a look could say— "You are my master, and I obey your wish."

"Can any one hear us?" she asked, half below breath.

"No," I answered her. "Look about you. Nobody nearer than that old chap at the end, and he's deaf."

"Well, then! He's off."

"I guessed that. What else?"

"You—you believe I'd help you, don't you?"

"Yes, Jinny, I'd believe anything kind of you."

"Don't believe too much; you might be sorry," she said, with more sharpness than the occasion seemed to demand. "But I—I'd help you to almost anything; my oath I would." She seemed to encourage herself; I wondered why.

"How soon'll you be ready to go?" she asked me.

"I'm practically ready now."

"He's off—to Port Moresby. By Cairns. He'll get his stores there, and he'll attend to some business—" She cleared her throat, made play with the fan again. "Business," she went on. "And get away immediately —to Tatatata."

I knew it; I had been expecting it—but the word hit me like a stone. "Go on," I said, with some difficulty; my tongue seemed stiff.

"He wired for a prospector to join him, three weeks ago, and he's come. Tatatata is—"

"I know all about it. I know," I said, getting angry, "a damn sight more than Fanshawe knows."

"He got it straight," she said, "from some woman who died; she had it from her bloke, who was killed and eat by the cannibals."

"No, that was his mate. How could he have got back to tell any one?"

"I thought," said Jinny, and now she looked away from me, and the fan was working hard, "I thought, somehow, the woman was with the bloke who found it—on the expedition."

"On the expedition. Never, Jinny. That's one thing that a woman can't do yet, and hasn't done—go exploring in Papua."

"Can't she? Why?" asked Jinny. She was still looking away from me, the candle that burned ever behind her gold-brown eyes was lighted to new brilliance by reflections from the dancing sea.

"Because," I answered her, "exploring, nowadays, has been almost all done, the whole world over. There are only a very few doors still locked, Jinny, and you've got to ask yourself, why are they locked? The answer's plain. It isn't because nobody ever thought of opening them, or nobody ever tried—which appears to be the notion of the damn fools who blow into Port Moresby every cool season, to walk across New Guinea—but it's because the only things left to find—and we've got most of them—are so tough that it takes the best men doing their best—more than their best—to get through."

"A woman can be as strong as a man," said Jinny, fanning away. "Look at those lady acrobats on the Halls."

"If you took those acrobats," I said, "and matched them—no allowance for sex, no mercy for being a woman—against just as many men acrobats, and made them compete till some one dropped where d'you think they'd be? Behind the men, every last one. Get out of your pretty head all that poppycock about women being as good as men, when it comes to real exploration—or anything that drives right down to the roots. Exploring means the last ounce that the strongest men can squeeze out of their bodies, driven to the last ditch. It means the male brute, all out. There's no use for women, in a pinch like that."

I was not polite, I knew; but Jinny had hit me on a sensitive point. In New Guinea, the difference between real and sham exploration is a matter that interests all.

IT SEEMED that she was not interested. She yawned a little, delicately, behind her fan; changed the subject, or rather, went back to the beginning.

"Sir Richard's off, anyhow," she remarked. "He won't be more than a week or two getting things together and starting. That's the name of the place, what I told you. And whisper—I'll tell you what he's after—"

She leaned over to me; breathed into my ear a secret I had thought was known to no one but myself. "Now," she said, drawing back, and nodding wisely. "What do you think of little Jinny for telling you that?"

"I think you're very good indeed," I lied promptly. Dismay was the emotion that, in truth, had possession of me. I wondered how many people knew, or would know, and how soon they would be on the track of the unique, amazing place known as Tatatata. I swore to myself that, doctors or no doctors, I was off tomorrow.

Something of this I said. Gin-Sling eyed me with a satisfaction that I found almost puzzling. "Right; get off and beat him to it. That's the way, my lad; drink hearty, you'll soon be dead!" was her entirely Jinnean comment. "What way will you go?" she asked, presently.

"Way? Oh, by Daru, I suppose."

She seemed to like that, and I realized, with some astonishment, that the map of Papua was no blank to her.

"Well," she said, "I must be going, or the cats will begin to mew. Call and say goodby to me before you go. I'm out of a shop now, so I daresay I'll make back to little Sydney again. You've no idea what a lamb you look in those pink pajamas, cuddly boy!" This for the benefit of the matron, who was bearing down upon us with intent to end the interview. "No goodby," declared Jinny. "See you again soon." Her yellow stockings gleamed as she walked down the long veranda, just not dancing, out through the doorway into the smiting sun.

Next day I left the hospital. I called on Jinny, as a matter of course, and was rather surprised to find that she had sailed the previous night. The hotel people didn't seem to be sure what boat she had taken or where she had gone. And the truth was, that I had too much to do to puzzle over the matter, for more than a little while. Nor did I, for even an instant, suspect what matters of grave import had lain concealed beneath the light surfaces of our talk.

I HAD to go to Port Moresby, it turned out, because there was no one at Daru to take charge of my store, the man on whom I counted having suddenly left. I heard this by wireless, and decided on a flying trip to "Port," where I had other friends. I remember I was worried at having to go, but consoled myself by remembering that Sir Richard and his lot could not possibly get away before me, since they had still to do their recruiting, and mine was as good as done. I had only to whistle, and get as many boys as I wanted, but they would have to employ a recruiter, and probably overcome a good many difficulties before they collected boys enough to carry for a large party of strange white men. As to Pia, she was safe in the East.

So, feeling like myself again at last, I sailed once more in the merry sun and wind, heading my cutter for Port Moresby. I remember that I sang as I cleared the harbor, and smelt the open sea.

Never since then have I believed in presentiments, in warnings, or shadows that fall before events. There was no warning for me.

In the next chapters Amory has his last momentous meeting with Fanshawe, and Gin Sling begins to play an even more important part.

Here is a Humorous Story for You!

The MENACE at BAR X

By Blatz Henderson

THE cow hands at Bar X knew there was something in the wind. They could discern this from the way Old Man Brinnegan seated himself on the corner of a bunk. He sat staring morosely at the floor, expectorating with unusual solemnity at the sand-filled candy bucket which was near the door.

Bar X had come to sense with dreadful certainty every new outburst of Mrs. Brinnegan which in turn was of necessity communicated to the hands through the helpless Old Man. It was the opinion on the Bar X, although not communicated to him, that the Old Man had married the sturdy school-teacher in a moment of forgetfulness.

"She's a dang good woman," observed Slim Carpon thoughtfully, "but she ain't got no business on a ranch. Next thing you know we're all goin' to have to start out with a song book and teach them dang calves to beller in soprano or alter instead of whatever it is they beller in now."

Mrs. Brinnegan apparently believed it her duty to instil a greater degree of decorum into the leisure hours of the Bar X outfit. A week or so before she had conveyed through the Old Man the order that there should be less loud conversation on Sunday afternoons. It was her hour for Shakespeare, it seemed. The message had been received silently but when the Old Man departed wearily there was a lot of talk about Shakespeare and considerable interrogation as to what if any business he had at the Bar X.

Now the Old Man was plainly enough writhing under the burden of another decree from headquarters. The outfit waited uneasily until he should get up the nerve to relay it.

"Some of the woman's friends are comin' out," the Old Man finally announced, sweeping the room with a side glance of his kindly blue old eyes, now nervous with the import of his message.

There was no reply. Hank Schwartz picked up his French harp and sighted down the ridge, as if about to pull the trigger, if it had had one. Slim Carpon spilled Bull Durham from a brown paper and fumbled absent-mindedly in his pocket for the sack. Stub Mason began rapidly whetting his knife on a shoe sole. Bill Flynn played a queen of hearts on the king of diamonds.

"It's three women schoolmarms," the Old Man blurted out.

"They git here tomorrow and I got to

detail one of you to act on the entertainment committee and show 'em the sights, and the woman says she thinks Stub Mason had better be the one on account he's got more polish than the rest of you steer chappies." The Old Man grinned weakly at Stub, who by this time was whetting his knife so rapidly the sole of his shoe was almost in flames.

"I reckon you better corral out three old mares and shine 'em up tomorrow mornin'. The women'll be here about ten o'clock and might wanta go somewhere to see the sun go down or somethin'." The Old Man departed hastily.

Slim Carpon was first to recover and with a bound was on his feet bowing low to the red-faced Stub.

"Gents," he said, "meet Little Lord Mason, the schoolmarm's pet. Mr. Mason has got polish. He got it at the White Elephant at two bits a shot. Mr. Mason will tell the nice she stuff what makes Bill's legs bend out thata way and why it is that Hank's language sounds like hell."

Stub sat speechless, his lower jaw sagging. Then he recovered his voice and preliminary remarks lasted two minutes, actual count.

"What I wanta know," he concluded plaintively, his voice dwindling away hopelessly, "is whether this is a cow outfit or a gol blamed pasture for locoed schoolmarms."

"You better go git you a slate and pencils," Slim advised paternally. "I bet Stub gits a headmark right off. Did Little Bright Eyes bring teacher a apple?"

Stub threw a boot just a trifle too slowly. Slim was already out the door whistling cheerfully.

"My Gawd," exclaimed Stub in renewed anguish, "the rodeo comes off the Fourth and them there women will probably be here then."

STUB for six months had been spending money he intended to win at the Las Vegas rodeo. Stub was entered in the bulldogging, the wild cow milking contest, and was prepared to ride anything the management produced in the way of bucking broncs.

"That dang skulkin' Slim's got to get me outa this," he asserted mournfully but with determination. The others nodded assent. In a crisis the gang just naturally turned to Slim Carpon. They relied on his rather fertile brain to devise some means of escape from whatever doom lay in store for them.

As a matter of fact Slim at that moment was seated on the corral gate thinking deeply. He knew that Stub had set his heart on cleaning up at Las Vegas and he was afraid that the Old Man's reluctantly given order would result in Stub's quitting the ranch.

As he sat swinging his legs the Old Man appeared. He leaned against a post and said thoughtfully, "Them women are aimin' to stay here about two months, the woman says. They are old side kicks of her'n and we got to be right decent to 'em. Sometimes, though," he observed, "these city women don't always find a ranch is what it's cracked up to be. Well, good night."

The next day at ten o'clock three chattering women unloaded from the ranchhouse flivver and with many and varied exclamations of surprise and wonder at the long cool adobe house, at the miles and miles of mesa that rolled gently to the base of the Sandias, at the windmill, at the turquoise sky, in short with oh's and ah's at everything, they disappeared into the house. Stub, peering like a condemned prisoner from a window of the bunk house, in agitation bit into a deck of cards which had somehow got in the pocket where he ordinarily kept his plug.

TWO hours later the Old Man was introducing him to the trio. The cowman stood uneasily on first one foot and then the other, his floppy felt hat getting in his way and his straw-colored hair flying madly in the wind.

"This is Mr. Mason," said the Old Man. "Meet Miss Young, meet Miss Carlton, meet Miss Myers. Mr. Mason responds to the name of Stub and knows all about sunsets," he continued jovially. "He will be mighty pleased to show you all the sights around here and he will teach you anything you wanta know about the cow business."

"The women," said the Old Man to Stub, "want to go hoss-back ridin' this evening when it gets a little cooler. They say they don't wanta lose no time enjoyin' theirselves. I told 'em the three horses we got picked out for 'em is as gentle as the flivver and they say that's O K with them. So long about seven this evening you bring out the three old mares and ride up toward Tijeras way."

Stub, having said "Howdy" three times, was ready to depart, but it soon developed his presence was wanted.

"Oh, Mr. Mason," said Miss Young, who was not, "you mustn't run away. We want to talk to you, gather your view-point, and you must come sit down and tell us all about yourself."

"Yes, Mr. Mason," added Miss Myers, who wore black shell-rimmed glasses and who spoke in a rasping voice, "we must be friends."

"You see we are very interested," chimed in Miss Carlton. "You must explain to us the lore of the southwest." Miss Carlton was thin and tall. She peered and was quite evidently near-sighted.

"You see," twittered Miss Young, "Miss Myers is looking for material for a novel, and who knows but you may be the hero?"

"Miss Young is right," Miss Myers admitted raspingly, adjusting her eyeglasses and staring boldly at Stub. "I am in quest of atmosphere as much as anything else. You are, I believe, a type that would record well."

"He has such an intelligent face, has he not?" Miss Carlton said solemnly, after an appraising glance at Stub's weather-beaten visage.

"He's dang near human at times," interposed the Old Man savagely. He had listened to the appraisal of Stub with growing restlessness mingled with rising anger.

Stub, meanwhile, his face growing redder and redder, his ire rising, had shifted from one foot to the other and finally in desperation had unsheathed his plug of tobacco. He bit fiercely into it. Just then Miss Carlton had made the crack about his intelligent face.

"Do you chew?" asked Stub politely of her, solemnly proffering his plug.

There was a gasp, then three gasps. Miss Carlton shuddered and said no. Soberly he offered the plug to each of the other two. Each remained conscious, although neither knew how she did it. The upshot was that none of them accepted the offer and each of them seemed to feel rather weak. It was a shock to them.

In spite of the Old Man's frantic warnings, signalled from behind the schoolmarms' backs, Stub with frigid ceremony stowed away his plug and with a flourish drew forth cigaret papers and tobacco.

"Anybody want to roll one?" he asked genially.

"If you will excuse us, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Mason," supplied Stub. "Leander Burlingham Mason."

"If you will excuse us, Mr. Mason, we shall call you later. We are very tired now," said Miss Young, apparently speaking with credentials from the entire party. And they started for the house, steps faltering.

"Stub," said the Old Man sorrowfully, "you're a no-count trouble-makin' galoot. The woman is going to hear about that and she's sure goin' to put a hot iron on me. She'll probably dehorn you, though."

Stub merely grinned and as the Old Man caught his twinkling blue eyes he burst into loud and raucous laughter.

"You ornery fence bustin' son-of-a-gun by —— if that didn't shut that female up." And the Old Man walked unsteadily toward the bunk house, his shoulders shaking.

STUB spent the afternoon hoping the school-teachers would tell Mrs. Brinnegan and that she would demand a change of dude wrangler. The trio decided to wait until the next day for their first horse-back ride and likewise decided not to tell Mrs. Brinnegan of the insult.

"It's too delicate," Miss Young observed as they discussed the episode.

"She might take it as an offense, our making a point of it," said Miss Myers. "These cattle boys are well meaning and I presume that was his idea of hospitality. Imagine!" she ejaculated.

"What intestinal vigor these persons must have," exclaimed Miss Carlton. "Did you observe his mastication of that filthy bit of compressed nicotine?" She shuddered violently and closed her eyes.

That night in the bunk house Stub was plied with questions. He summed up his reactions in the following words:

"Well, the Old Man herds the flivver into the yard and opens the chute and this she stuff comes bawling out and stampedes all over the place. Later the Old Man lassoes me and drags me up and misters me to them schoolmarms. They look me over like I was a critter and one of 'em ba ba's to the other one, 'Oh ain't he funny,' and the other sister comes back with, 'He's got him a intelligent face.' So I hauls off and takes a face full of Yankee Boy and asks 'em politely if they ever eat any tobacco and if so to climb onto my plug. That kinda stampeded 'em and before the Old Man could get me out and snubbed down, why they was all wearin' out their shoes headed for the house with their noses sniffin' for rain or somethin'."

"There's a good chance," remarked Slim Carpon, "that these here women ain't goin' to stay on this ranch no lònger than a week or so. I ain't so sure they are goin' to find Stub the Little Lord Faountainroy the missus thought they would."

"Do you reckon?" asked Stub eagerly.

"ARE you sure he's gentle? He is a he isn't he?" nervously asked Miss Myers of Stub Mason the next morning as she prepared to mount Baldy, the ranch's most conservative old mare.

"Yes'm," replied Stub. "Gentle, but he ain't a he. She's a she," he added formally.

Established on three gentle mares, with Stub riding beside them on his own high-lifted roan, they set out for Tijeras canyon.

As the quartet rode through a canyon whose high narrow walls rose steeply hundreds of feet in the air, Miss Carlton glanced timidly behind her.

"Of course there are no hostile Indians left," she said to Stub.

"That," said Stub solemnly, "is what I ain't never been able to understand about the east. They think back there the redskins is all either long dead or settin' around in their front yards plucking begonias."

"Why, aren't they?" quickly inquired Miss Myers, fixing Stub with that cool eye which he did not like.

"No, marm, they ain't," he replied in a low voice.

"What do you mean?" asked Miss Young.

"Oh, nothin' much," said Stub. "Only this talk about the Indians all being off the warpath is no good." He lowered his voice a notch.

"A year ago next month in this canyon the Isletas got themselves around a Sunday-school picnic party and took ten scalps. They was eleven scalps and a wig present. One of 'em got away and the wig fooled 'em!"

"Mr. Mason," said Miss Young severely, "do you mean to sit there on your horse and tell us that in this day and age a party of Indians went on the warpath and massacred helpless women and children?" She gazed suspiciously at Stub.

"No'm, it wasn't that bad," said Stub. "This here was a stag picnic. They was all settin' around a keg of Juarez beer blowin' suds for all they was worth when in comes this gang of Isletas and starts shootin'."

"I thought," said Miss Young sharply, "that you said this was a Sunday-school picnic."

STUB kicked his high-tension roan in the sides. The roan reared straight on her hind feet, pawing the air with her fore ones. Miss Myers and Miss Carlton shrieked. When the roan finally decided to walk on four legs Stub decided it was time to change the conversation. Not so Miss Young.

"I thought," she repeated, "that you said it was a Sunday-school picnic. Why were they serving beer?"

"This was near beer," replied Stub, "very excellent near beer. Better than anything you git in Albuquerque. Yes'm," he remarked enthusiastically, "that sure was good near beer. And it was a hell—I mean it was a right smart party. That is it was until the Indians spoiled it," he added hastily.

"Mr. Mason," said Miss Young firmly, "I believe you are inclined to prevarication."

"Yes'm," answered Steve thoughtfully, feeling his leg. "It's ridin' so much does it. I've noticed all the boys got the same kind of er—limbs."

"I was not speaking of your limbs," replied Miss Young with some asperity. "I said I thought you were prone to prevaricate, to trifle with the truth, to tell a good story for its effect."

"Oh, no marm," protested Stub earnestly, "I wouldn't lie about a thing like that. I honestly know because I talked to Skillet Green who was there and he swore it was the best near beer he ever tasted. Said he wondered if it didn't have a little real beer in it."

"I was referring," replied Miss Young calmly, "to your story of the scalping of these Sunday-school persons of whom you have spoken, and not of the quality of the near beer they drank before going to their ghastly death, if deaths there were."

"Marm," said Stub earnestly, "you can depend on me not to give you no bum steers. These here Isletas wasn't what you would call on the warpath. They was just all drunk and mad because it rained the day before they was going to have a corn dance and pray for rain. They come in on the party, had a argument and suddenly started shootin'. They was eleven and they butchered 'em up some."

Miss Myers and Miss Carlton shuddered and drew their horses closer in to the party. Miss Young continued her examination of Stub.

"Why wasn't there anything in the papers about it?"

"They hushed it up on account of the Christian Endeavors or somebody like that going to have an annual convention in Albuquerque. Also," Stub added brightly but soberly, "they was, as you suggested, some little question raised as to the contents of that there beer. They was a little talk that the president of the class, who had the wig, still had a snoot full when he got to the nearest ranch house."

"It must have been strong beer indeed, if he still felt the effects after going through that experience," Miss Young commented.

Stub gazed at her with something near respect and admiration in his glance.

"Yes'm," he said, "and the Old Man never mentions it because Mrs. Brinnegan don't know about it and he don't want her to on account it would make her nervous. We never mention it."

COMMENTS on the Isleta raid continued full blast for the remainder of the ride, Miss Young's skepticism visibly weakening under the strain of Stub's addition of amplifying details. He gave the names of each victim, told where he was buried and how many survivors there were. He spoke sadly of one of his boon companions who gave his life on the Sunday-school picnic. He commented bitterly on the traits of the Isletas, whom he termed the most savage of all the redskins, exceeding in cruelty the Apaches or Navajos.

"The hard thing about 'em," he said, "is that they live down there on the paved road and do their farmin' and raisin' their papooses and pups and they look harmless as a hobbled calf. But they ain't," he added warningly.

Before the party reached the ranch house, however, Stub had extracted the promise that the trio would be careful never to mention the Isletas within earshot of Mrs. Brinnegan.

"Poor Lillie," said Miss Carlton, "to think that she is practically living in danger every day of her life."

"And us too," added Miss Myers nervously.

Stub whistled in fine good humor as he unsaddled the horses.

That night he related the day's event to a little group in the bunk house. They listened with appreciative ears, breaking into hilarious laughter as Stub told how he had nearly been cornered when he forgot he had said it was a Sunday-school picnic and commented on the keg of beer.

"I dang near said they was settin' around a jug of moonshine," he observed ruefully. "I don't know how I would a got by with that."

"I got to hand that there Young woman a lot of credit," he added. "She's a savvyin' critter and I claim to rate a pair of silver spurs for makin' it stick."

"Well," said Slim Carpon, "what about slappin' on the brand now you got 'em corralled. Supposin' we produce some Indians."

"Indians," replied Stub. "I'd hate to let 'em get a sight of any Isletas or they would surely know right off by their faces they is the peacefulest dadgummed redskin that ever sold a trinket."

"I reckon a little paint and a feather or two wouldn't be so bad," Slim replied. "Now here is my idea."

For thirty minutes the bunk house was in earnest consultation. At the end of that time the plans were laid.

Briefly the formula for achieving quick departure of the three school-teachers with attendant release of Stub Mason for more pleasant duties at Las Vegas was this.

Slim Carpon, who was going to Albuquerque soon, was to continue on the Isleta. At Isleta he would engage the services of three youths, good friends of the cowhands through employment at the ranch the previous summer.

The youths were Severo Lujan, Enrique Gonzales and Tomas Garcia. Each, it happened, was a student at Haskell. They were intelligent, affable and accommodating boys and Slim anticipated no difficulty in persuading them to come to Stub's rescue.

The three would don war paint and feathers and would secrete themselves in the recesses of Tijeras canyon on the day specified. Stub would proceed with the three women to the canyon for another ride. He would be armed with two pistols, loaded with blank cartridges. The Indians would appear brandishing tomahawks and would also be armed with pistols and blank shells. A thrilling fight would be staged, the women would be scared nearly to death, Stub would be victorious. The Indians one by one would fall, presumably dead, and all would escape to the ranch.

En route back Stub would impress on the women the virtue of their immediate departure lest in an investigation and subsequent arrest of Stub they be compelled to testify against him. He would again warn them not to tell Mrs. Brinnegan lest it upset her so that she decide to leave the ranch and the Old Man and his two daughters. He would assure them that from now on the ranch would be guarded and Mrs. Brinnegan would be in no danger whatever and he would point out that likely the fate of the three Isletas would end forever any further depredations in Tijeras canyon.

The plot was worked out minutely, with Slim urging that Stub prepare his every argument well in advance. It was to be a perfect "crime" without a single slip. Nothing was to go wrong and the result was to be that the three schoolmarms would depart from the ranch quietly but none the less effectively. Then all the gang would throw a happy leg over their ponies and set out cross country for the annual rodeo and cowboys' reunion.

THREE days later Slim returned from Albuquerque with the announcement that on the next day the Indians would station themselves in Tijeras canyon, arriving there directly from Isleta, the road from which did not lead past the ranch house. The Indians were familiar with the canyon, had been given explicit directions as to what they should do and were anticipating the adventure in high spirits.

The Isleta is perhaps the richest of all Pueblo Indians in a sense of humor. Not even years of training in government schools can rob him of his happy endowment of levity. To the trio of youths who had attended Haskell and as members of the famous Haskell football squad had traveled all over the United States, the idea of masquerading as savage warriors was immensely amusing. Accustomed to mingling with their white brethren on a plane of mutual companionship the prospect of posing as potential scalpers tickled their youthful fancy.

That evening when a ride for the next day was proposed, Stub suggested Tijeras canyon. It was Miss Young who unwittingly saved the plot when the Misses Carlton and Myers demurred at the idea of again visiting the scene of the Sunday-school near-beer slaughter. Her thinly veiled sarcasm about the nerve of her two companions forced them to a reluctant assent. So it was arranged, and the stage was set. That night Stub chuckled in his sleep.

With two shining six-shooters loaded with blank cartriges Stub Mason set out the next morning to convoy three maiden school teachers through the dangerous Tijeras canyon, along whose ravines might lurk painted savages, eager to add forelocks to their collection of unwary Sunday-school picnickers and near beer consumers.

"The reason I wore these gats," said Stub soberly, as they started single file up a particularly high, narrow gorge, "is that I had a sort of a bad dream last night and it give me the worries."

"What did you dream?" asked Miss Young.

"I dreamt," he said, "that I was goin' to a double funeral and it seemed as I went past the coffin that there were Miss Myers and Miss Carlton there."

The Misses Carlton and Myers shuddered.

"Why, Mr. Mason, how terrible!" they cried unanimously.

"You mean," said Miss Young, "that the Misses Carlton and Myers were functioning as honerees at this funeral to which you were invited?"

"Marm?" interrogated Stub, puzzled.

"Let it pass," Miss Young replied.

AT A point where the canyon broadened slightly Stub, by prearranged plan, was to halt the party, engage in conversation and let one or all of the women spot the Indians who were to peer out from overhead rocks, slipping from one to the other in plain view until the redskins were certain that the women had seen them. They were then to fire and Stub was to return the fusillade.

"A mean place for a Indian raid," Stub observed, as the quartet halted.

"What would you do if Indians should

descend on us," inquired Miss Young curiously.

"I would shoot as long as I had any bullets left, marm."

"So would I," replied Miss Young as she whipped out a .45 automatic. "I'm not such a bad shot either," she remarked carelessly, releasing the safety. "See that sparrow on that rock?"

She pointed casually to a small bird perched on a stone probably seventy-five feet away. "Watch it," she said and quickly raised the automatic as she fired. What was left of the sparrow dropped to the ground.

Miss Young had spoken, aimed and fired within thirty seconds. As the sparrow fell Stub Mason felt cold chills chasing down his spine. Cold perspiration stood on his forehead. The woman shot like a fiend and three masquerading Indians were due to present their mock savage figures to that deadly aim in the next minute or so.

Before Stub could summon his brain to meet the situation Miss Myers shrieked, an Isleta Indian a hundred feet away uttered a war whoop and two others danced into view wildly waving tomahawks and moving as if to descend on the travelers.

Like a flash Miss Young fired three times with her automatic. Stub gazed, paralyzed, waiting for his three Indian friends to topple over as dead as the sparrow which had just fallen victim to the school-teacher's gun.

Before he could say a word she had fired twice more. The Indians still lived, their howls now emerging from behind a rock, whence they had dived after the first shots. Peering cautiously from behind a big boulder they yelled a trifle uncertainly and started emptying their guns.

Stub weakly fired in their general direction. "Have you got any more shells?" he asked Miss Young.

"No," she replied, "I'm out."

He breathed a sigh of relief and shot with enthusiasm, joyfully. He knew none of the boys were hit and he believed the plan would still work out.

The firing from behind the rock ceased.

"Let's run for it," he cried breathlessly. The Misses Myers and Carlton wheeled their horses about, ready to set spur, their faces white, lips quivering.

"Run along if you want to," called Miss Young, who sat calmly on her horse, inspecting her automatic. "I want to see Tomas Garcia, Enrique Gonzales, and Severo Lujan."

"You want to what?" demanded Stub in amazement. "What do you mean, marm?"

BUT Miss Young had pocketed her automatic and amid shrieks from Miss Myers and Miss Carlton had spurred her horse toward the rock where the three Haskell warriors lay waiting for the party to disappear so that they could take to horse, ride down another canyon and on to Isleta.

Then Stub heard Miss Young call, saw three sheepish Indian lads rise and bow to Miss Young, and they all shook hands.

Three minutes later Miss Young returned beaming.

"I haven't seen the boys since spring," she said to Stub, who sat limply on his saddle, his face flushed, his jaw sagging like an empty tobacco sack.

She eyed Stub sternly, then broke into laughter.

"Stub, old top," she said, "you're a good boy but a liar. You don't have to drive us away. We are planning to go to Vegas where you will do yourself and the ranch proud at the rodeo. In the first place your bunk house walls are thin and in the second place I teach a Sunday-school class at Lawrence, Kansas, where Haskell is located. Your savages from Haskell are in my Sunday-school class."

Stub rose to the occasion. He took off his floppy sombrero and bowed from the saddle.

"Marm, where did you learn to shoot?" he asked humbly.

"I was raised on the Bar T ranch near Gallup," she answered.

"How could you miss them boys?" he asked faintly.

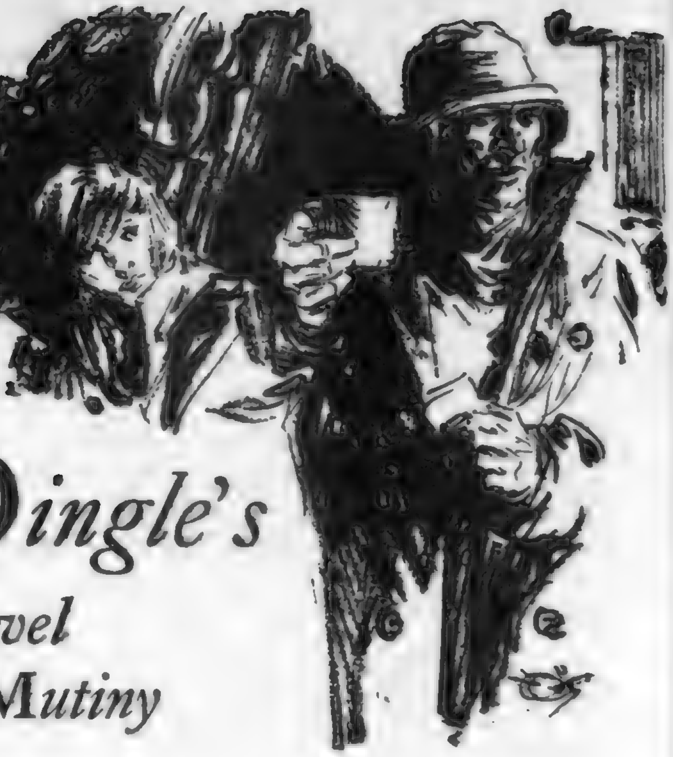
"Blank cartridges, all but the first one," she smiled at him.

"These other ladies," asked Stub forlornly. "They cowhands too, I suppose?"

"No, Stub. They are genuine tenderfeet from Nebraska," replied Miss Young kindly. "I've got a lot of explaining to do to them."

"I should say you have, both of you," said Miss Myers indignantly.

It was at Stub's insistence that Miss Young entered, and won, the cowgirl's target contest at the Vegas cowboys' reunion.



Captain Dingle's
Brutal Novel of Men and Mutiny
Part III

Preceding events briefly retold

Val Orson, a hard-fisted, man-killing driver of men and ships, brought the old clipper *Kestrel* into San Francisco, completing a record run for sailing ships across the Pacific. The crew had been driven so hard by Orson that on reaching port they all jumped ship, with one exception—the first mate, Martin.

Orson bought the old *Kestrel* when she was to be junked and refitted her in something of her former glory. The clipper is his one love, his dominating passion. Men, to him, are only slaves with which to work his ship, while women afford him but temporary pleasure. The milk of human kindness is not within him, his morality is that of an animal.

As is his custom, he had taken a woman with him on his last voyage, this time a little brown girl he captured in the Orient. On reaching port he turned her over to a missionary society, telling them she came aboard as a stowaway.

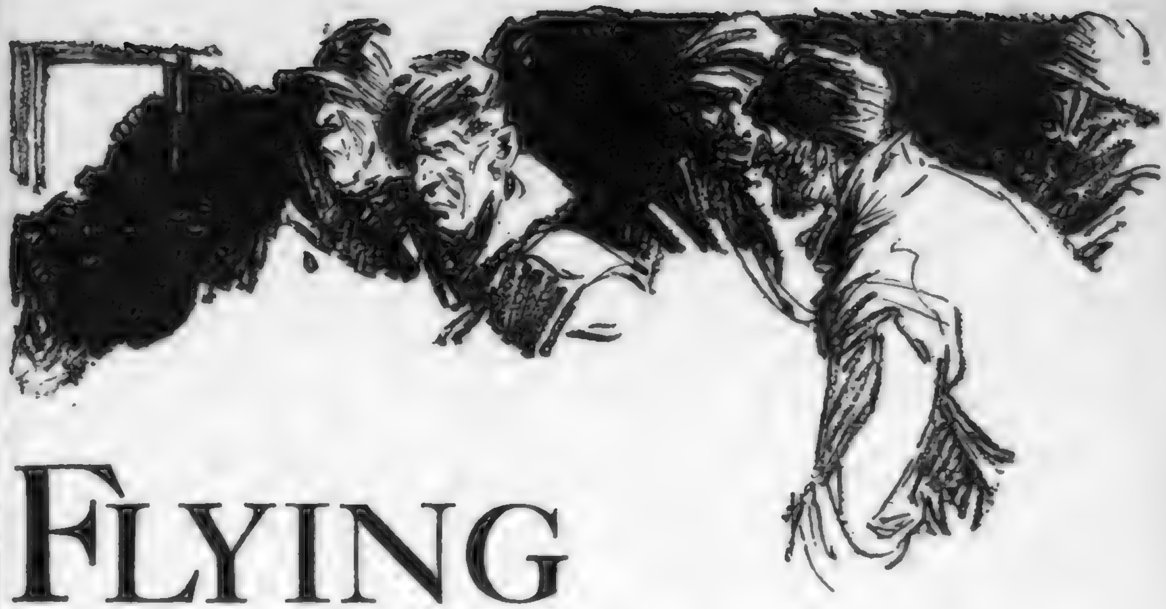
The clipper's cargo is discharged, she is reloaded with lumber and made ready for sea. Because of his unwholesome reputation as a driver and mankiller Orson has great difficulty in engaging a crew. He tricks his former first mate, Martin, into reshipping with him, hires a second mate and finally shanghaies aboard a crew of jailbirds and waterfront scum. During the days occupied by these details, Orson has been much ashore and seen a girl, Nancy Prouse, he wishes to take aboard with him. Orson, knowing she will not come willingly, lays plans and finally kidnaps her. Just as he is getting Nancy into the tender, to go aboard and set sail, he is attacked by a Greek sailor, a member of his former crew. With him is the little brown girl Orson had left at the mission. Orson quickly overpowers the Greek, who tried to knife him, breaks his arm and throws him into the tender beside Nancy.

During the struggle the brown girl ran away and Orson pushes off for the *Kestrel*. Once on board he locks Nancy in his cabin, slips anchor and is away. They are followed by a police boat, but escape it in the fog. When they are well under way, Orson leaves the clipper in command of Martin and goes below to see Nancy. He finds her half out through a porthole and quickly drags her back inside.

Orson has the ex-parson read the marriage service for him and Nancy—not that he feels bound by it in any way but merely to make Nancy more submissive. She believes the ceremony to be genuine.

During the following weeks Orson lives up to his repuation as a driver, the *Kestrel* becomes a hell-ship, men stagger about her decks exhausted, but always kept at work by the hard-fisted skipper. When there is a breeze they are kept pumping night and day as the old *Kestrel* is "wide open" when driven hard under full sail. When becalmed Orson keeps them busy scraping paint, reservicing the gear, etc.—always work, no rest, and poor food.

Finally they sight a smaller sailing ship and Orson declares he will stay on deck until they have left her astern. Val Orson watched near the wheel. He ate sitting on the steering grating. Sometimes he seemed to dose, sitting there. But helmsman after helmsman could swear that he never really slept. And that was the beginning of bitter times for the *Kestrel's* brood.



FLYING KESTREL

CHAPTER XIII

MAN POWER

MEN had called Val Orson a devil. Perhaps he was. He certainly possessed many devilish attributes. Twenty-four hours after the old *Huntress* had been seen, Orson still kept the deck as alert, as vital as on that foggy night when he fooled the police. If he slept he did it as a cat might sleep in a dog kennel—one eye at a time. Through a night of growing wind, with many a keen drift of sleet, he paced back and forth on the poop, drinking mighty mugs of scalding coffee, black and strong enough to float a marlinespike; and when the steward could no longer remain awake Nancy Prouse took up the making and serving of the pungent liquor.

All that night, though she dutifully served her lord, adding sometimes a little offering of cake or biscuit out of sheer human goodheartedness, Nancy never received from him a word or a glance of thanks or plain notice. Still she trotted up and down the stairs, bearing mugs full or empty, humming a little song, all bravely fighting off sleep because her man, her husband, kept the deck and would not rest Nancy no longer regarded Val Orson as anything but a masterful, powerful, superior being who had chosen her for his mate and had clinched the mating with marriage. Holding that idea, with her primitive training behind her, Nancy thoroughly believed with all her heart that her duty lay in his service. Her religious training, forced into her and accepted by her in unformed childhood, had taught her many things she did not understand in the least; but so deep rooted were those things, and so mysterious were the rewards and punishments connected with those things, that she, like millions of others, continued to accept those teachings as representing facts even when a woman grown. And one of the things she had been taught was, that a woman must cleave to her husband through good and evil though the heavens fall.

And when the snow came, and on the gale it grew to a bitter blizzard, she still tenderly cared for his wants, though her clothing equipment was of the scantiest for such weather. Val Orson stood six feet in his sea-boots. Nancy was something less than five-feet-one in her borrowed silken Chinese slippers. Val Orson's oilskins fitted her like a tent; his sweater reached to her knees and the sleeves covered her hands. His sou'wester extinguished her head until she had to cant her chin almost to neck-breaking point to see him when giving him coffee. That amused him. He would take the cup, and scoop the cakes or bread from the saucer, with a grin that seemed to eradicate the utter fatigue that dulled his senses. He would crush the sou'wester farther over her eyes, grip her oversleeved arm, and send her below all shaking with pain and apprehension; yet Nancy always thrilled to the marrow under his brutal kindness.

She was not of the keen mentality to get the fullest thrill, perhaps, but while dabbing tinned butter on the bruises he had made she dumbly worshiped her masterful man. That was about the limit of Nancy Prouse's understanding. Yet in her dreamy moments, when lying in bed waiting for a possible sound which might tell her that he was coming down to sleep properly in his proper bed, all too rare an occurrence lately, she had a vision of a son she might give him; and that son would be sturdy and healthy, clean and honest like her, and strong and virile, masterful and wonderful like him. Of course the babe might be a girl. It might be simple like her and wicked like him. But Nancy Prouse believed in the God of her youth, and believed with all her soul that the child she hoped to bear would be a paragon of all the combined beauty and power and brain of his parents. Once, during the earlier days of the hardening weather, she felt seasick. She courageously fought and conquered the feeling, with the heroic means suggested humorously by Orson, simply because she refused to irritate him by succumbing to an unsailorly weakness.

FORWARD were many opinions of Val Orson, and some were pungent. Only one man seemed to withhold a spoken opinion, and that was the Greek, whose twice broken arm mended slowly in the icy temperature the *Kestrel* sailed in. But when the skipper was named in the forecastle, no man cared to look twice into the Greek's eyes. The others loudly told of what they meant to do, would do, could do to Val Orson if certain conditions came about. The sea-lawyer, Tredway, and the ex-parson Groves, specialized in wordy harangues. Norris and Godwin, who had joined the ship in challenge of the blood-buckoism of Orson, alone seemed to thrive of all the forecastle gang. And they gave little satisfaction and many irksome moments to the late Reverend Peter Groves and the always irreverent sea-lawyer, Tredway.

"IF I wuz a fightin' bloke, I'd show yer," quoth Tredway, his eyes downcast at the mess-kid. The forecastle was wet and chill. There was the bogy stove; but Orson, to supply men enough to sail his ship, had not only cut stores to the last ounce, but had totally ignored fuel for the bogy stove. Two days of fierce driving, through a wild quartering gale in sleet which grew to plain snow, froze the forecastle and rendered its inmates less than human. And the mess-kids contained dreary rations, pound by law; the kettles, pint by the same unholy ruling, of the least solid and liquid on which human life might be sustained. Long since had the leak in the eyes of the ship increased to an alarming volume whenever the ship took a deep plunge, and that was frequently now.

"If I wuz a fightin' bloke—" quoth Tredway.

"What 'ud you do?" grinned Norris, knowing full well at whom that gibe was aimed. His grin riled the Reverend Groves. It always riled him. It infuriated Tredway, the sea-lawyer.

"I'd do somefink, bli'me, and not sit larfin' at blokes as don't brag abaout joinin' a ship to try how tough a bloke is!"

Norris laughed. Godwin had lost the habit of laughing lately. The ship's little world had so changed.

"If you squealers had half the guts of Orson, this ship wouldn't be a hellship, she'd be a crack packet," said Norris. "I joined her, so did Godwin, to try how tough this Val Orson is. I know, and Godwin knows, and it didn't take us long to find out. He hasn't scraped us down, has he? You don't see any black eyes or busted arms on us, do you—?"

"No, Lord stiffen me! Becos you ain't got the guts of a louse to face him!" squealed Tredway, in frenzy.

"We'll face him ready enough if he ever rides us. Orson rides only mules, though, so far as we can see. You're all chafed with saddle sores."

NORRIS turned with a shrug. Godwin wanted to stay with him, and meant to, but many things had occurred since sailing from San Francisco Bay which made him wonder whether he had been sane when signing on in the *Kestrel*. Godwin was the quieter of the pair. He spent a lot of his lifetime looking for excitement. In many ships he had found it; but never to the extent that he had found possibilities for it in the *Kestrel*. But still, he could agree with Norris regarding Orson. Never yet had he, or Norris, met with a man having such a name who could wear it as well as Val Orson wore his.

"Do not anger these brave boys. They will strike when the *Kestrel's* head droops," said the Greek, in silky, derisive accents.

"I'll strike right now!" snapped Godwin, turning upon the Greek. Groves smiled. He nudged Tredway. Together they placed hands upon Godwin and the Greek. It was not necessary; but to assume that it was, and to make an issue, was certain, in the state of mind of the forecastle, to force the seamen of that watch to take sides. Sooner or later there would have to be a climax, and some would be on one side of it, some on the other.

"Brothers, I beg you to be slow to anger," chanted Peter Groves, hands uplifted, eyes rolling. "Soon our young valiants will lead to battle, and Captain Orson will bite the bloody dust. Is it not so, brother Godwin?"

"I'll bite you in the bloody nose," growled Godwin, rolling into his bunk.

Groves laughed. Others laughed. Only the Greek maintained an expressionless countenance. The watch lacked many hours of its rightful due of sleep. Tredway, the virulent, spunkless sea-lawyer, wanted sleep more than anything else. Anything else, that is, than reprisal. If Tredway wanted anything in this world, more than a full belly, it was revenge. He came from that part of London near the Tower, where socialists and Russian propagandists have their free fling under the banner of utterly free and sometimes rather foolish old England; and one of the memories he nursed in his wizened little chest was that he had shaken hands with Kropotkin at a mob meeting on Tower Hill.

Tredway was ready, at any time, to carry a rear banner, to follow a leader, to shout in chorus, to stab in the back, to lay off a good safe distance and howl bloody murder and sudden death to anybody holding higher place than he.

Groves had shown Tredway a way to raise the whole standard of living for the workers of the world. That the precious pair had no notion of work made no difference. Val Orson represented to them the bloated capitalist; the ogre. Legitimate game for all good rebels. Unfortunately, Orson had a faculty for making people work.

"Can't we git 'old o' that bloody floosey of his?" Tredway wanted to know. All the watch was asleep, except Tredway and Groves.

Groves had vivid memories of trying to get hold of Orson's woman. His grinding teeth still pained him when he ate anything more solid than hash. Tredway was a fixed satellite, if a satellite can be fixed: that is to say, Tredway revolved, not without throwing off a few sparks, entirely and contentedly, in the orbit of Peter Groves. But Tredway was by way at times of making himself a nuisance. Groves wanted to start something. Oh, very surely! But not until the denouement could be fairly seen, so far as the late Reverend Peter Groves was concerned.

"Tredway, you must govern your evil passions," Groves said, with tremendous unction. "Mrs. Orson is not to be—"

"Missus Orson! Bli'me!" cackled Tredway. "Why, you told us yerself she wusn't no bleedin' missus. She'll help us to skoff him as soon as she knows—Say, matey, 'ow about gyppin' the Greek into startin' somethink? He's had long enough to let 'is arm get well."

"I counsel patience. I have a plan by which I shall be invited aft quite often. Then—"

"Yus, then you'll be a hell of a lot o' good to anybody! And while yer about it, I and all of us is workin' our guts out at pumps, and watch-taykles, and pulley-haul." The vicious little sea-lawyer jumped up, waving his hands. "Gawd stiffen me! Are we to carry on luggin' our soul cases apart all the way round Cape Stiff? Wot's the good o' that? Strike while the iron's 'ot, that's my motter."

Norris half raised himself, picked up a sea-boot from beside his bunk, and swung it. The heel took Tredway behind the ear, and the argument was finished at least for that watch.

CHAPTER XIV

SEA FEVER

MR. MARTIN walked the poop from wheel grating to ladder head and back, stepping briskly and without much regard for his weight above the cabins Lest that seem incredible in such a ship a the *Kestrel*, with such a master as Val Orson, and particularly with such a dutiful mate as Martin, it might as well be mentioned here that cold weather had swiftly settled upon the ship: bitter, bone-cracking weather. Even that was not sufficient reason for any good sailorman of the deepwater to tramp over the head of possible sleeping shipmates; reason number two, then, was that Val Orson at last had been forced to sleep in earnest. In the chartroom he lay, dead to the world, his strong soul lost in weariness; his powerful body at the mercy of whomever dared. But Nancy sat on the settee, all curled up, twisted would better describe her excruciating posture, shivering with the biting cold that whistled through the door cracks; and in her lap lay Orson's head, the wiry hair all wild about his face. Her hand, which had ventured to loosen his oilskin coat at the neck, was gripped in one of his with power far beyond any effort of hers to move. And to entirely exonerate Mr. Martin from any unsailorly charge, it may be said that the *Kestrel* had the wind over the port quarter. So, in tramping up and down, keeping his blood moving, the mate only walked over empty cabins, since his own room was on that side, and the second mate could not hear him across the breadth of the poop; the master's room was empty, and the steward had no right to want to sleep anyhow, at that time o' day.

Once or twice Martin glanced into the chartroom. Once he entered, and before Nancy's eyes could well light with reproof, he had whipped the carpet from its fastening pins and whirled it about her shivering shoulders, folding what was left over Orson's long form. Nancy stared at first, as if doubing the motive for the act. Then, when Martin went out without a word, she smiled after him, and he caught the smile through the foggy port glass.

Martin had no great love for his captain, and very little respect for him as a man. But as a seaman Val Orson stood very high with Martin, as he must stand with any real seaman of the deepwater. Moreover, Martin knew well enough that Val Orson alive was better than two Val Orsons dead, and the way Orson had been living lately spelled death if he did not let up. As for the woman in the case, that was none of Martin's business, until the woman appealed to him for help; and Nancy Prouse looked as if she needed no help from anybody. If ever a woman had come aboard the *Kestrel*, and become reconciled to her handling at Val Orson's hands, it was Nancy. Martin very wisely let well enough alone.

THE ship's way was a different matter. No matter what part Orson had in the performance of the *Kestrel*, there was the stupendous fact that she was once again a full day ahead of every sailing record ever put up since the first man made the first floating thing depending upon the winds for its volition. Reflected glory from that last staggering passage had warmed Mr. Martin so thoroughly that he glowed even now at thought of it. But this present passage bade fair to eclipse that other, if only the gang forward could be kept to their work. And they would be. Orson was a driver, a man-killer, but he spared himself no more than he did others, and neither did he spare his ship. Never in all his seafaring had Martin seen a ship so pressed with sail when winds blew hard. Even now, as he walked the poop with tingling ears, toes, and fingers, that fore-topgallant sheet looked as if a half-mile more in the wind's velocity must crack it in the sheave and flog the sail to rags.

But as the exercise warmed him, the mate saw no peril in that fact. He saw only the tremendous difference that sail made in the ship's speed. And he would have been the very last man in the ship to advise taking that sail in until the sheet actually snapped.

In brief, Mr. Martin was in love with the ship.

Prosaic though his sea life had become, a matter of hard necessity and the only thing he knew, mature Martin still had sea fever. Or rather, after long years of commonplace voyaging in commonplace ships with commonplace masters, the sea fever of his youth had recurred with the *Kestrel* and Val Orson. Young Ringlin drove the men in his watch because Orson demanded it, and he had decided that Orson was no man to cross. Martin drove his men in the port watch because he could see that the ship demanded it, and he had decided that the ship was to be sailed to another record if man power and the winds held true.

Now he watched that straining topgallant sheet through flurries of sleet and snow, humming a tuneless chantey between his teeth. The men on his watch stood by in the lee of the forward house, cursing the ship and all within her now that the bitter weather searched out the inadequacies of their outfits. They had cursed the skipper almost entirely before. Only now and then, when work was afoot, did they use the sailor's prerogative to curse the ship. But the cold got to their bones. They cursed all and sundry; even each other.

"Try the pumps, m'lads!" shouted Martin at midwatch. The bell was struck four times; the wheel relief shambled aft, grinning as he took the trick, while the man he relieved swore terrifically at the prospect of going to the pump wheel immediately he let go of the steering wheel.

Sullenly the men ground the pumps around, the men at the hauling lanyards pulling without any regard to the position of the handles. A dreary dribble of water emerged from the lips, and Chips knew there was more water than that.

"Coom on, boys, rattle her clear," Chips sang out hopefully. "Let's give her a song. Now then:

"Fire in the lifeboat, fire in the gig,
Fire in the longboat roasting the pig!
Fire! Fire! Fire down below!
Keep the pumps a goin', lads,
There's fire down below."

Chips sang alone. The man nearest to him, a quiet, hot-eyed man who seemed of all the gang most outwardly docile, shoved him with a savage elbow and spat.

"To hell wit' yer bloody shantys! Wish there wuz a fire that 'ud burn the ship and roast that bloody swine aft! Let him ease the ship, then we won't sweat our guts out pumpin'."

"Ought to be glad o' work to warm ye," grumbled Chips. But nobody sided with him, and he pumped.

THE stream gained volume, through the necessity of the water coming up to force out that above it. The gang did a sulky job of it, and Martin, watching the growing seas, the driving sleet, knew they were not clearing her. He would have put life into them by jumping down among them; but he dared not leave the poop while that grim sleeping man lay so near. The wind increased too. Gusts that came along like icy breath shrieked, and when they passed they left something of themselves behind them to reinforce the gale. A long sea hissed above the rail, broke, and fell aboard with a crash. The men at the pumps left the handles and swarmed onto fiferails and stays. Two, not alert enough, were picked up on the roaring water and hurled along to smash against the spare topmast in the waterways. And the ship heeled down to the blast. The precarious topgallant sheet snapped with a gunshot sound; and the flogging sail shook the yard and mast until men who had clambered onto the fiferail leaped down into the welter of water in fright that the whole tall fabric would crash about their ears.

"Now he'll have to ease her, damn him!" a man screamed, spitting out brine and blood, for he had fallen head first upon the pump wheel, iron and merciless. The mate was already half-way down the poop ladder, bawling to men already crazed with resentment to let-go halyards, man clewlines, sheets, and braces to get the flogging sail in; and out of the chartroom stepped Orson, alert and awake as if he had never been asleep, the carpet trailing behind him and Nancy toppling over on the reeling deck in her effort to disentangle him.

"Call all hands, Mister Martin," Orson sang out, his clear, cutting tone piercing the uproar of wind, sea, and thundering canvas. The steward called the second mate. Martin ran forward, pounding on the forecastle doors, kicking at the bosun's door while standing pounding at the door of the starboard forecastle. Both doors lay adjacent, at right angles. The bosun came out, growling until he saw Martin. Men unfastened the forecastle door, scared into wakefulness, peering out as they scrambled into meager clothes. Water flowed over the forecastle floors, a grimy stream on which floated bits of straw, matches, broken shoes, scraps of hardtack, and all manner of débris from an untidy gang of discontented sailors who never really merited the name of seamen. Godwin and Norris were among the first out, and they alone of the watch were clothed in a fashion to brave the bitter cold outside.

The Greek grinned. He always grinned now. A death's head grins in much the same way. There was much to be said in excuse for the Greek grinning that way. He had been shanghaied without even the poor outfit the others got from the crimps. His twice broken arm, though healing, was a limb of devilish agony in the cold and damp. In every case of vicious weather hitherto, he it was who always stood double wheels while other men could work and warm themselves. And none knew like the Greek knew how mad a thing the old *Kestrel* could be, steering at the whim of a mad skipper, over-pressed with sail in the cruelest of wind and sea. Tredway cringed past the mate, almost crying. Groves tried to put on bravado but was a less heroic figure than Tredway as soon as he saw what awaited him outside.

"Up aloft and secure that sail!" the mate shouted. He had to shout to be heard. Ringlin was already down among the disorganized mob milling around the gear.

"One watch can get that sail secured and unbent," roared Orson. "Make the others pump her clear. Tell the mate I want him!"

Martin stumbled aft. Orson met him midway up the weather ladder.

"The ship's loggy with water! See those dogs rattle her free. And get that sail on deck and bend a new one. You'll stand Kalashie watches from now on until the weather moderates."

Mr. Martin stumbled down again, and into the weltering main deck. He joined Ringlin, driving men before him. Ringlin, good enough sailorman though young, left the deck to his superior as soon as he saw him, and sprang into the weather rigging with a yell of encouragement to the tardy men to follow him into the roaring heights aloft, where a very demon of broken wire and iron and canvas strove to tear the fore-topgallant yard and mast from the fastenings and whip it out to the gray, spumy sea.

"One o' you stand by to 'tend the gear, the rest get back to pumping," Martin ordered.

For a wonder it was the Greek who got the job to tend the gear for the men aloft. He knew the ropes of the *Kestrel*. He had been there before. It was an easy job for him; much easier than any he had had before, and it made him grin. But he was always grinning lately. Nobody noticed any difference in him.

MARTIN himself, seeing Orson in command, led the brooding gang at the pumping. He started a chantey, the same as Chips had started, since it was a good old song for clearing a ship of water, as it was for manning pumps to put out a fire.

"Fire in the cabin, fire in the house,
Fire in the galley burning the scouse.
Fire! Fire! Fire down below!
Send her round my hearties,
There's a fire down below!"

Martin sang alone, as Chips had done. Chips was aloft now, helping to secure the yard before the wild canvas wrecked it and gave him the job to make a new one when his carpenter's bench was unapproachable in the torrenting water that swirled about it.

"Come on, lads, sing up!" yelled Martin, raising his head to start another stave.

"Sing yerself and go to 'ell!" Tredway piped up, preposterously bold. The little forecastle lawyer was on the verge of tears. His was the valor of frenzy.

Martin let go the pump brakes, raising a ready fist. Another cresting sea rose above the bulwarks, falling aboard with a roar. Orson, mindful of man shortage, as even a bucko without half his worth had to be in like case, roared:

"Watch yourselves! Look out for your lives!"

Martin's fist fell, but to grip Tredway as the sea washed him from the pumps. The reverend Groves, intent upon what seemed about to happen between Martin and the forecastle lawyer, found himself borne along on the crashing sea until he was lifted bodily and jammed between two steps of the lee poop ladder so that he could not stir, and perforce had to take the next surge of bitter water all over his gasping face.

"Haul up that weather buntline, on deck!" a thin voice pealed from aloft. It was hard to recognize in that voice the bull note of Ringlin. The wind was asserting itself above even the bull notes of human beings. The Greek grinned, half broken against the rail, and clawed his way to the belaying pin which held the buntline that had been imperfectly hauled home.

"Round with the pumps, my lads!" Martin bellowed, the water gone. "It's pump her or sink with her. And look at her go! Now boys, she's a fine ship. Give her a chance!"

"Let 'er sink, perish 'er!" squealed Tredway, spitting out salt water. He was no way abashed by his escape, nor by the circumstance that Martin had perhaps saved him from a bad accident. He gripped the pump wheel more as something to hold on by. He had to follow the motions of the rest.

And Ringlin. The beefy young second mate who joined with so much youthful ardor, and had so early decided that he was not the best man in the ship, worked up there in the howling chaos of damage like ten men, forcing men to toil by his example. Out of what seemed to be certain loss, he contrived to save all of the shredded canvas except two cloths. Chips saved the yard. The bosun caught the broken end of the wire sheet and jammed it fast before it whipped more gear to bits by its murderous flicking. And the men came panting down to the deck. They had earned their salt. That driving bully aft could do no less than let up now.

"Get another sheet fitted, and hurry with the new sail!" Orson snapped out. "Chips, try the well."

The well showed the water no more than held in check. The pumps had not lowered it.

"Now pump, blast you!" gritted Martin, unwilling to hear what Orson would say to him. "Pump, by gravy, or I'll work you up! Come on, now!"

ORSON stood like a grim effigy of scorn on the poop while the new foretopgallantsail was bent. But Mr. Martin led the gang, and he was savage enough to do no more saving of souls when seas boarded the ship, but his hand was ready and heavy on shirkers. Groves was found jammed in the ladder when the two mates went aft, the ship free of water and the sail set.

"I'm desperately hurt, sir," Groves whimpered.

"Haul him out!" growled Martin. Ringlin kicked and tugged the man free. And Martin looked him over.

"If you're hurt, go see the captain," he said.

"I'm not hurt that badly," Groves returned hurriedly, and scurried along to where his watchmates cowered in shelter.

THE rest of the watch Martin stood in wonder that the ship could endure. Orson was in the chartroom again, but poring over the chart and his precious records. Just before eight bells, Martin, watching the passing of a screaming squall of snow that had hounded the *Kestrel* along for twelve miles in little more than half an hour, saw something which sent him to the chartroom door in a hurry.

"A ship right under the lee bow, sir!" he shouted. Orson stepped out, scarcely interested.

"Can't you decide what to do—?" he started to say; then, as near excitement as Martin ever saw him, he rubbed his eyes, snatched the glasses from the box banded to the chartroom rail, and peered through the flurrying snow.

"Hell and glory!" he muttered, scarcely above a whisper. "That's the *Trimount!*"

"She sailed two weeks before us, sir!" Martin cried, incredulously.

"It's her, just the same. And she's making bad weather of it under lower topsails! Mister, send the bosun and a couple of good hands up and put parcelling around the nips of all the sheets. Rout Ringlin out. I told you to keep Kalashie watches. No watch below. The hell you think this is, a steam-liner? Send him to see to every nip in sheet or tack. Some of the headsails look as if they need overhauling. By God, must I stay on deck twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week to make the ship sail? Get moving!"

"I can sail your damned ship as well as you can! I only told you there was a ship under the lee bow," Martin retorted angrily. But he went about his job with a will; and he saw that other men worked, if not with a will at least with effect; and he did it, not because of Orson's bitter tongue, but because the ship was being splendidly sailed through howling impossibilities by a man who, if mad, was mad after a sailor's heart.

And Mr. Martin was suffering with recurring sea fever. Nancy Prouse, shivering in the chartoom door, wondered, and feared, and understood none of the hurly-burly except that her man was undoubtedly lord of all the men around him, and something had happened to the ship, with reference to that other ship, which made Mr. Martin chuckle and rub his hands as he started again to pace the poop just before Ringlin relieved him for the first watch.

CHAPTER XV

KALASHIE WATCH

ONCE in a driving burst of sleet that cut the faces and hands of the men and forced the hardiest to close his eyes for fear of blindness, the black loom of a grim coast abruptly menaced the *Kestrel's* southerly flight. For many days no sun or stars had pierced the dreary canopy of storm wrack to give Orson a check on his position. But that land was somewhere adjacent to the western entrance to Magellan Straits. There is no other land like it in all the bleak barrens of the southern seas. And for a sailing ship that was no place to be. The course was altered, the land cleared. More southing must be made before changing course eastward to double Old Cape Stiff. But altering course forced Orson to brace in his yards; and that showed adversely on the log. For days of gale and blinding snow the ship had roared through murderous seas with yards almost square. The gales astern of her hounded her along at a speed which piled the bitter seas high at her stem until her flying kestrel figurehead barely skimmed the water. The yards were just sufficiently forward to give every sail a bursting full; and even Val Orson had been seen to smile when the squalls were fiercest, and his storming clipper was logging twenty-one knots.

Those were days to try the endurance of men. The *Kestrel's* big crew, poorly fed, vilely housed, clothed in meager rags, almost welcomed the cruel round of Kalashie watches for the very labor that made their blood keep circulating. A Kalashie watch simply means keeping all hands ready for necessary work, leaving for the future such things as cleaning ship or fine weather jobs, and keeping no such thing as watch-and-watch except for the helmsman and lookout.

Orson's little notion of putting chafing gear in the nip of the sheets was almost on a par with that other trick of certain rather mythical ship drivers of padlocking their sheets and halyards. Almost on a par, because the chafing gear naturally jammed the sheet in the sheave or block, and sail could neither be lowered nor flown without first clearing away the chafing gear. To do that a man must go aloft. Orson could stop that. Martin would stop it too, since his sea fever struck him. Ringlin would stop it out of sheer admiration for the skipper's guts. Those old yarns about padlocking sheets and halyards lacked the similitude of truth, simply because padlocking them need not prevent any man cutting them away in the darkness if he wanted to, and he could do that on deck. But Orson's crew had ceased to care much about his terrific sail carrying. They grew to realize that this cracking on saved them a lot of fierce labor aloft so long as the gear held together.

But they had their burdens just the same. The forecastle was a den of icy darkness. The portholes were small and thick. Very rarely were they clear of swirling sea. The forecastle skylight was covered with tarpaulin and battened down to keep out the boarding seas. The doors, on the maindeck, were opened only when somebody had to enter or leave. And it was cold, wet, and utterly cheerless, with water sliming across the floor, bearing, besides the common débris of the ill-kept dungeon, bits of rotten wood wrenched from the ceilings and waterways by the ship's tremendous laboring.

A hawsepipe had worked loose. Jets of water squirted in between the iron and the wood. Around the skylight coaming the water crept in too, regardless of battens and tarpaulin. Tobacco was wet; hardtack was moldy; as soon as the salt beef or pork or stockfish was cold, if any were left after a meal to serve for the next, it developed a scum and froze solid. Clothes never had a chance to dry, even when they could be taken off. Bedding, mostly straw, blankets, mainly cotton, stayed wet and stank like stable litter. Men stayed wet, and stank in spite of the sea's perpetual washing. They developed salt-water sores and boils; between fingers and toes deep fissures appeared, raw and torturing; and the ship was not yet up to the Horn.

ON DECK they were no better off. A dreary gang, far too beaten to do more than mutter of fighting, they huddled in whatever poor shelter they could find on deck, shivering between spells of pumping, almost continuous now, and shambling around at the heels of the mates or bosun dragging out their souls on brace or sheet to trim the ship so that her hellion of a master might drive another tenth of a knot out of her wracked old fabric.

And the ship herself; ice lay in glistening sheets along the decks, washed by boarding seas only to be frozen again. The galley was the only deck structure whose door was not always locked with ice. Even that was frozen shut whenever economy of fuel kept the stove cold for an hour. That was often. The lower rigging, in the thickening of the lanyards and deadeyes, was solid with packed snow and yelling with a fiendish beauty whenever the light caught it. Men chopped the ice away, saw it freeze again, and chopped over and over in intervals of pumping out water which froze as it laved their feet.

Sails were hard as boards or thin steel plates. Ropes at the blocks grew to grotesque proportions from the accumulation of moisture dripping down from wood and iron to hemp, until halyards and sheets, buntlines and clewlines, reeftackles and downhauls—every tackle or whip or runner or fall that had a lead through a block or sheave, had the appearance of a silver pipe blown into a bladder when hot and there solidified.

The yards were topped with ice. Jackstays and rovings were welded in one with the canvas. Parrals and trusses were just great bulging lumps of frozen gout. Icicles a fathom long hung from stays and shrouds until some lurch of the ship snapped them; then they fell with a metallic crash, and the man who chanced to be underneath was unlucky.

NORRIS and Godwin had good clothes. None of the rest of the forecastle crowd had enough rags to cover them. Chips and the bosun were snug enough, but had nothing to spare for improvident sailors. There was no slopchest aft. Val Orson ran expenses in outfitting to the hole below minimum. Put to makeshift, men begged or stole old potato sacks and shreds of torn canvas; surreptitiously cut off strips of tarpaulin; made by the simple process of wrapping and lashing with spun yarn, foot-gear and headgear, body covering for themselves, cursing, while they shivered far less than they would otherwise, the skipper and his ship, the mates and the weather; everything else except their own heedless foolishness ashore which sent them to sea again in a Cape Horner almost naked.

AFT, the ship was not quite so cruelly dreary. As long as there was no carrying away of gear the mates could remain on the poop. Little water came up there. Once or twice in the fiercest blasts of the following gale the *Kestrel* was pooped by the sea, but it was rarely, and she sailed too fast for more than a licking crest to overtake her. And the helmsman could keep dry too. And warm. No man who steered that storming clipper before such a wind and sea could ever be cold. A lee helmsman was necessary most of the time, for not even the Greek, the best helmsman of them all, could hold her to her course in the heavier squalls, though he now possessed two sound arms, and had an overwhelming passion to be kept on the poop, within sound, sight and reach of Orson every possible moment. Whenever Orson was on deck, which was nearly always now, the Greek's eyes, sweeping from lofty upper leeches to the compass again, never failed to flicker for just one instant in passing upon the stalwart, formidable figure of the skipper.

Orson only left the deck to check up the reckoning, to pore over the chart, to read again for the hundredth time the book of passages, or to snatch a brief, uneasy sleep in the chart-room, fully dressed, with his salt-crusted mop of hair in Nancy's patient lap. His meals she brought up to him. She gently insisted that the steward make soups out of stores set by for emergency. She stole spare life-boat rations from the mate's room, so that her man might have hot chocolate, scalding beef-cube broth, to fortify him against the terrific ordeal he faced and seemed likely to go on facing. Nancy seemed to sleep as little as he. She seemed always around the chart-room. She ate her own frugal meals there, watching him through the window as she ate. She brought up sewing, and sewed through the day when his head was not in her lap, fashioning small garments, singing quietly to herself. Sometimes, when Orson entered abruptly, which was often, her song would cease, the glow would die in her eyes and fear spring to life there. If he noticed her at such times it was but to roughly grip her arm and shove her out of the way. Never a word of kindness; never a glance; his life was centered upon the course his ship was making, on her speed, on her endurance.

Endurance was the word. The old *Kestrel* showed her age now. Every timber, knee, stanchion and beam complained, wept, wept dry rot. That crumbling fid-hole aloft gave way so far that the rigging had to be set up while the ship was wallowing in a hellish broth of sea, to save the whole upper structure from tumbling about the ears of the miserable crew.

"Mister, go up there yourself, with the carpenter, and see what can be done to wedge up the weight off the fid," Orson told Martin. And Martin entered so far into the spirit of that driving ship master that he really did make some shift to bolster up the decaying spar. And when, one shrieking dawn that was only a more pallid night, the mizzen-topgallant sheet actually snapped at last, but jammed in the sheave with the chafing stuff, Orson stopped Ringlin as that blustery young second mate was about to leap for the halyards, bawling for the watch meanwhile, with a grip that hurt.

"Hold on. Maybe it's jammed so it will hold," he said hoarsely. The searching cold was getting to Orson too. In a minute he decided that the broken sheet would remain jammed until somebody went up and cleared it. "Let it stand, mister," he said. "Rotten gear 'll never stop this ship."

NANCY went below after a long, cold vigil, feeling ill. She scarcely noticed that the saloon was warm and light with stove and lamps. Fumbling with her oversize wrappings with chilled hands, she gazed half nodding at the great deep, wide bunk behind the curtains. It should have looked snug and inviting to her aching body. It only looked vastly vacant. It made her shiver to think of lying all alone there, rolling from side to side as the ship labored. Shivering, she thought again of her man, the brute of a man who never had a soft look or kind word for her in the hurly-burly of driving his ship; the brute of a man who, nevertheless, was her husband, bound and tied by parson, ring, and Book. He never saw the bed. At least, he had never slept in it since the day when the old *Huntress* had almost overtaken the *Kestrel*. He paid Nancy no more attention than if she had been an image of wood instead of a girl full of warmth and vitality, whose duty lay in his service, whose duty was gladly and fully done whenever it was demanded. Nancy wondered dully if those other women had endured similar neglect; those colorful women of the East whose pictures he had so gleefully tortured her with.

But Nancy was his wife. Those others—well—

Nancy wrapped herself up again, and went back to the chart-room. She would stand Kalashie watch herself.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREEK

THE *Kestrel* flew south. After a night of blasting squalls that tested her to the last fastening, the wind suddenly moderated to a mild breeze. Stars came out. The cold intensified. Orson brought out his sextant to take a star sight, calling Ringlin to take the chronometer time. But for the pale starlight the night was black. Only hoping that his star binocular might reveal a horizon for his observation, Orson brought down his star. And there was no horizon. Sweeping the glass around in a wide arc, he saw to the south and east a limitless line of dark irregularities. And something clattered along the ship's side. That could be seen as it tumbled away in the wake.

"Ice! Curse it!" he ejaculated savagely.

Ringlin waited at the chronometer.

"Damn you for a wooden man! What 're ye waiting there for?" Orson roared at him. Ringlin shut the case and left the chart-room hurriedly. He no longer answered Orson back. There had been no outward show-down between the beefy, confident young second mate and the notorious hellion of a skipper; but daily intercourse had taught Ringlin much. He stood at the rail, keeping a lookout, waiting for orders.

Soon the waning moon came up, pallid and weak; but its light opened up the vast southern ocean, and there was little of comfort in the view. Ice covered the sea. Cakes floated as far as eye could see; on the long rolling swells that sweep around Cape Horn they glistened in the moon rays. Between the breaths of the dying breeze the sharp, metallic clashing of hard ice filled the air. The ship rumbled to the passing of tons of ice cakes along her sides.

Dotted among the scattered drift ice a score of tall bergs loomed like castles, spires, sheer walls of murderous beauty, white and black. In daylight with the sun on them they would be silver and green. In the ship's track they seemed thickest, and the breeze remained a light air, sufficient to give the *Kestrel* steerage way, but scarcely enough to drive her through the clogging ice at a speed which gave her entire facility to avoid some of the greater bergs which assuredly held their most menacing bulk hidden beneath the sea. And while the breeze was at its gentlest, down came the snow.

Nancy brought up a jug of coffee, black and scalding. Her legs wanted to crumple under her. Her eyes were leaden and had black rings about them from sheer exhaustion. But she tottered to Orson's side with her jug. He took it without looking at her, drank down the bitter, staggering draft straight from the jug, and shoved it back to her.

"Go to your bed, kid," he told her harshly, still without a glance.

Nancy shivered in the companionway with her empty jug, watching him as he strode along the maindeck to the fore rigging. Both mates were on deck then. Martin stood beside the helm, where Norris steered, and Ringlin stood at the poop ladder head, with all hands clustered beneath him in the shelter of the halfdeck. And like a great spider against the cobwebbery of the mazy rigging Val Orson swarmed aloft to the fore upper-topsail yard, active as a lad of sixteen, powerful as a jungle ape, swinging himself from lower rigging to fore-top by sheer arm strength; taking the topmast rigging in great arm hauls four ratlines at a time; seeming to leap from rigging to yard surefooted and swift. Nancy watched until she saw him up there against the moonlight, secure and dark with the whirling snow thickening about him; then with a little sigh she went obediently below to her bed. She partly undressed for the first time in many nights. It was almost like a benediction to her simple soul when she heard the clear, far carrying voice of her man peal down through the frosty air from his lofty aerie:

"Clear water to the south'ard! Run her off two points!"

She heard men answer the shout. Ringlin was down the ladder in a jump, his lusty young roar driving men to the braces as the yards were squared in more. Mr. Martin's cool tones gave the helmsman steering orders, and Norris repeated them in a voice as cool. It was all so vividly forced into Nancy's mind: that supreme competence of her man; that supreme confidence of the others in him. She took off all her clothes and went to bed to sleep like a babe, as secure in him as simple faith could make her.

FOR half an hour the *Kestrel* held on. There was no more wind. The snow fell straight down, like a feathery blanket. Orson could still be seen aloft between snow flurries, and he was covered all over with white until he could easily have been mistaken for the bunt of the sail had the sail been furled. If Orson was saying things to himself up there in the bitter white cold, they were said with superb restraint. Only when some lead was seen which might help extricate his ship did he make his voice heard.

"Ready 'bout ship!" he yelled once, when a little more wind drove the snow athwartships in a blinding screen.

"Ready 'bout ship, sir!" bawled back Martin, and helped to flatten in the spanker. Ringlin led his gang to tacks, sheets and braces. The ship had been sailing with checked yards, and in the light breeze she took a long time to come to the wind. The great courses were lifted to clear the rails. Men stood by the braces, waiting until she slammed her fore canvas into the mast. Then she came around fast; while that grim, snow powdered figure on the topsail yard held on imperturbably to the topsail tye, apparently careless of what the swinging yard might do to his hold. The mainyards were hauled, then:

"Let go and haul, for'ard!" the mate sang out, and the fore braces were taken in at a run while the yards swept around. And still the silent figure aloft kept his place, though when the fore topsails filled on the new tack he must have been jerked into the the sea but for his tenacious hold on the tye. And when the yards were trimmed, and the headsheets shifted over, he gave his orders in the same imperturbable voice:

"Steady as she heads now, and stand by to tack ship again."

The breeze strengthened again,; and with it the snow turned into a blizzard. Men shivered in the maindeck. On the poop the helmsman was blue. The mates went below by turns and put on more clothes. Poorly clad men grumbled. But there were two men who seemed impervious to cold. The Greek stood ever at the fore rigging, between jobs. Orson remained aloft as motionless as if he were clothed in some non-conducting garment that would let none of his body heat escape.

"I bet 'e's got a flarsk up there!" stuttered Tredway once to the Greek as they finished coiling the gear after another tack.

"He is thee devil himself, and he will not get cold," the Greek grinned. But Tredway always went back to his corner nearest the poop after a job was done. The Greek never went a step farther away from the fore rigging.

Right through the bitter night the ship was directed in her passage by that silent, motionless figure on the topsail yard. Toward morning the blizzard intensified. It was cruel, fiendish even in sheltered places. Time after time the voice aloft would call down:

"Tack ship, mister!" and around the yards would be dragged, with never a song, with never a yelp of enthusiasm. Only the growling, ominous thunder of the ice alongside urging on men who were long past willingness. Then at times:

"Wear ship! Ice close aboard!"

And again braces and sheets and tacks were manned, and the dreary business of coiling up a mass of gear gone through again.

MEN spoke about Orson in low tones. Men who had cursed him most heartily admitted that he was sticking to the job like a man. There were men who even said that without him up aloft there, the ship could never have come through the night. Godwin gave Tredway a stiff jolt in the back and said:

"See? That's how tough he is."

"Yes, and you and that mate o' yourn 's proper scared of him. Proper old windbags, you two are, my oath!"

"Not scared, little man, but proud to sail with a man of his guts," Godwin retorted, with another jolt that made Tredway cough and curse him.

"Guts! It's his own blessed ship, ain't it? Why shouldn't he stop up there? He ain't arf starved and naked like us pore blokes. It ain't guts. It's fear o' losin' his bleedin' old ballyhoo!"

"If he lost his ship you'd lose yer worthless life, so shut up!" growled a sailor who never said much. Tredway moved forward. He hated his shipmates, for nobody seemed to want his company. Groves had insinuated himself into the galley and was not on hand during the last two maneuvers of wearing ship, and Groves alone showed any tendency to foregather with the little sea-lawyer. Tredway meant to shout out the news when the ship tacked or wore again, and have Groves pulled out to do his share. Meanwhile, there was the Greek, standing alone by the fore rigging. Tredway would talk to him for company.

"Go away! I will kill you if you stay here!" the Greek muttered vehemently as Tredway touched him and spoke. Tredway stared up into the man's face. In the gray of rising dawn the Greek looked like a fiend from a frozen hell. His teeth gleamed, and his hand was at his belt. Like a rat the little man scurried back to his shipmates.

"Bli'me! The Greek's gorn potty!" he gasped. "Said he'd slit me bloomin' throat, he did! Gawd!"

"Can't blame him," retorted Godwin, dryly.

"Why?" Tredway almost screamed, full of fright. Ringlin appeared at the ladder then:

"Give the pumps a whirl, me lads! Warm you up. Hop to it, sons."

Dumbly the men trooped to the pumps, jostling each other, without regard for watches or turns. All night they had been on deck, alternately chilled to the marrow and sweating at the gear. Sweat froze on them; the cold had no longer power to hurt them. Beyond a certain point the cold just numbed them.

"Can't you raise a tune between you?" Ringlin shouted, putting his lusty young strength to the handle. "Hey, Godwin, you ain't dumb. Start something. There's the Old Man up there for six hours freezing stiff, and he ain't sulking. Come on, now!"

Godwin was at the wheel end of the handles, looking forward, and as he hove at the pump his eyes were fastened upon the motionless Greek.

"Groves is in the galley, sojering," squealed Tredway. "And there's the Greek, loafin', too."

"The Greek 'll be in the next gang. "I'll get Groves," returned the second mate, crisply. "Start that song, Godwin," he said as he pulled open the galley door to bring out Groves.

"There's a girl asleep with a blue dress on,
Shake her, Johnny, shake her!"

There was little response so far. The Reverend Groves was hustled from the galley, and flung among the pumping gang.

"An unsafe couch she's resting on,
Shake her, and so wake her!"

went on Godwin.

Ringlin joined in; and a voice or two crept sheepishly in. No doubt the song helped the work, no matter how unwillingly sung.

"Storm clouds gather on every hand,
Shake her, Johnny, shake her!
Ratch her off to clear the land,
Shake her, and so wake her!"

"That's the stuff, bullies!" roared Ringlin. "Sooner you clear her the sooner you go below. Round with her, old sons!"

"On deck!" pealed Orson's voice, as clear and piercing as if he had not been perched up there in a blizzard for six hours. "Open water to the eastward and south. Hold her as she goes. Let that gang pump her free and then send them below."

"Hear that, my sons? Rattle her around!" the second mate encouraged them. "There's a captain for you! Send you below while he's still on the job. Sing out, Godwin."

"I bet he's just about goin' ter murder us wiv work soon as he comes down!" grumbled Tredway.

"Lying asleep there on the deck;
Shake her, Johnny, shake her!
No thought of sea or storm or wreck,
Shake her and so wake her!"

Godwin sang, and singing watched the Greek. Suddenly the Greek moved. The rigging shook. Down through the swirling snow clambered Orson, and he moved stiffly, uncertainly, as if frozen. He blundered when crossing the foretop, and seemed about to fall.

"Give us the rest o' the song!" cried Ringlin, heaving more than his weight at the pump, as much for the warmth engendered as for encouragement. But Godwin was scarcely conscious of pumping himself, and singing was out of his mind. Through the half light of dawn and snow flurries he saw Orson reach the sheerpole and turn to swing down to the deck. And the Greek sprang forward as Orson let go his hand-hold.

STEEL flashed. There was a choking cry, the Greek struck downward with his sheath knife at Orson's neck. As swiftly as the Greek sprang, so Godwin left the pump and darted forward. It all happened in a matter of seconds. Ringlin was swift to see something was doing; and after Godwin he plunged. Godwin reached the fore rigging, with hands reaching out for the Greek, and the second mate reaching out for him, at the moment when Val Orson staggered under the stroke of the knife. The rest was so staggering sudden that Ringlin's hand was on Godwin's collar, and Godwin's hand was almost touching the Greek, when Orson gripped his assailant's arm in both hands and wrenched at it. The Greek's agonized yell went up among the tall spars hidden in snow. Twice that arm had been broken by the same hands. The knife stroke must have failed. Nobody saw at the moment whether Orson was stricken or not. All any one saw was that Orson suddenly shifted his grip from the Greek's arm to his throat, and, with a face so cold, so devoid of expression that it looked like the face of death, slowly throttled out the man's life as he stood.

He let go and the man dropped to the deck.

"Have Chips bundle him up and dump him," was all Orson said, and without a second glance at the dead man walked aft, tugging the knife out of the stiff collar of a leather jacket he wore beneath his oilskins. Men who had believed him a devil, men who had been almost ready to believe him simply a superman, bent over their pumping and watched him affrightedly as he passed. He walked with difficulty. He was undoubtedly half paralyzed with cold and exposure. Yet he drew forth the knife and tossed it overboard without a sign that he realized how near it had come to letting out his life. And when he reached the poop, and the steward, hastily called by the mate, stood there ready to anticipate his needs, all that Orson said was:

"Keep a good lookout, and hold her to

the course you're steering, mister. And steward, rouse out that woman of mine and send her up with some black coffee and biscuit."

All he did was to spread out the chart, holding down one edge with the book of record passages, and, his forefinger on the place of the last sure position, glower darkly at the place he believed the ship must be now after the varying courses of the night. Precious days were wasting. Ice lay wherever he would sail, except in the direction away from his course. Precious days!

CHAPTER XVII

RUMBLINGS

CHIPS sewed up the dead Greek in a bit of old sail, and duly ballasted him for launching with a fathom of rust-pitted cable. Norris was slowly thawing out after his long spell at the helm, and the process was painful. Norris was in no mood for jest. He saw no humor in Godwin's yarn about how Ringlin had thought that he, Godwin, meant to pile into Orson too, when he was actually going to the skipper's assistance.

"Why wouldn't he think you meant to jump the Old Man?" Norris growled, painfully rubbing his icy feet. "Who here would want to stop anybody slipping the steel into that black-souled swine? Eight hours I stood at that bloody wheel!"

"Six hours he sat up there on the tops'l yard. If he hadn't, where 'ud you and all of us be now?" Godwin persisted. He hated Orson for a shark-blooded tyrant; but he had to admire his sheer grit; and he knew that Norris would feel as he felt when the cold was out of his bones. And there was neither grog nor fire in the forecastle to speed the process.

"Yus, an' he corpses the Greek, pore beggar, an' sez, dump 'im, just like that!" bleated Tredway. Groves was scraping out the breadbarge, trying to think up some excuse for going aft without danger to himself. He believed Orson might be persuaded to unbend a bit, since his ordeal aloft must have warned him of the effects of bitter cold. Tredway's shrill complainings had lately irritated the once reverend. Now they touched a note that found responsive echoes. "Just like a sack o' spuds, he sez, dump 'im!" the little sea lawyer went on, almost screaming now. "I sez to Chips, I sez, 'ain't he goin' to read 'im a piece out o' the bleedin' Bible?' I sez, and Chips sez, 'Bloody lucky to 'ave a funeral at all, tryin' to knife a bloke!' Bli'me! Didn't he arsk to be knifed? A shame he wuzn't, that's wot I say. And like a sack o' spuds—"

"He shan't be dumped like a sack of spuds, little man," Groves cut in. "I'm going to volunteer to read the service over him. There may be rum in it for me. There's a long chance I may get some for the crowd."

Groves watched his chance and ran aft. Daylight was trying to flood the sky. Only the snow seemed more visible. Sea and sky were slaty gray. Bits of ice floated past as the ship sped down wind. In the lee of the maindeck snow lay knee deep everywhere but in the course of the water from the pumps. There a gully of ice cut the snow. Far to the northeast a pale patch of lighter gray revealed where the sun might be; but only between blanket-like swirls of driving snow. Groves mounted the poop ladder and was at the chart-room door before the officer of the watch had seen him. Orson leaned over the chart table, one hand at his throat, the other on the chart. His eyes were glittering, and the brows above them lowered in a black scowl. Nancy stood at one side, holding a coffee jug. The steward came up the saloon companionway as Groves appeared at the door.

The steward had a storekeeper's billy in his hand, and he looked frightened. Orson slammed down a hand on the chart savagely, and the steward dropped the billy with a clatter. The noise caused Orson to swing around, white faced and angry. Forestalling any outburst, the steward blurted out:

"A whole cask o' beef is bad, captain! Opened it just now. No brine in it. Stinks, it do. Stores is proper short now. What'll I—"

"Head it up. It'll get eaten yet, and with gratitude," Orson snapped, uttering a harsh little laugh that might be defiance of Fate, or humorous anticipation. He took his hand from his throat, and Nancy, whose eyes never left him for a moment, started forward with a little cry.

"Oh, you're bleeding!" she murmured. Her fingers went to his collar, ripping it open in spite of his irritable protest. "Why, Val, it's a nasty wound! Who did it? Do come down and let me dress it. The cold will turn it into a dangerous sore."

ALL of poor Nancy Prouse's training surged back upon her. She had been reared where poultices might be said to be always ready; where every springtime a huge pot of brimstone-and-treacle inevitably appeared, with a terrifying Squeerslike wooden spoon stuck in it, and a terrifying, Squeerslike aunt or grandmother saw that every juvenile member of the family got properly dosed; where a whitlow called for hot bread poultice, and a boil demanded linseed; mustard baths for a cold had been part of her home curriculum. Her pretty, simple, gentle face was full of a vast motherliness as she pulled at his sleeve. Her big, innocent eyes held deeps of motherhood that seemed to reach far beyond mere solicitude for the hard man who had coolly stolen and held her. Something about her made Orson stare down at her anxious face, and he nearly smiled. He actually moved to follow her urging. Groves believed his opportune moment had come. He stepped forward, one finger boldy touching Val Orson's shoulder.

"Captain, sir, our messmate is about to be buried, and the men are uneasy because the poor soul is to go overboard without a prayer."

Orson grinned, without any suggestion of merriment.

"What the hell's a prayer to a murderer?" he asked. "You say some prayers over him if you like. You've got a Bible for'ard, haven't you?"

"Yes, a Swedish Bible, captain," returned Graves quickly, and boldly glanced at Nancy. Orson's grin turned to something almost wolfish. But Groves was taking no more chances.

"I can read the service over the body, sir, and shall gladly do so. It is terrible to think of a soul launched into the beyond without benefit of clergy." He hurried to finish, because Orson was already on the stairs, led by Nancy. "It'll be cruelly cold there on deck, sir, and I shall be bareheaded," he said.

Groves nearly stopped breathing in the instant after his hint was out. He had vivid recollections about that other occasion where a Swedish Bible and grog went hand-in-hand. Strangely, Orson did not swing on him. Instead, he spoke to the steward over his shoulder, while slowly descending the stairs in Nancy's wake.

"Give all hands a tot o' grog. It'll help their bellies to stand the news when rations are cut down. Give this hellbender a double allowance, and tell me if he gets saucy again."

The once reverend Groves hurried forward with the glad news. Men stared at him in astonishment. Some cursed him; called him liar and unholy joker; but they followed when he went aft, and they found the steward there with grog. And they trooped forward again, in the driving snow, at the heels of Groves, to speed the Greek into the icy sea. They stood bareheaded, at the command of Groves. Neither the mate nor Orson appeared; but young Ringlin was callow enough to feel a little awed still, and he stood there too, though he did not remove his cap until Groves sonorously intoned:

"We therefore now commit this body to the deep, to be turned into corruption—"

Groves was reading from memory. His book was written in Swedish, and, besides, was a Bible, and not a prayer book.

"Bli'me! That ain't in the Bible!" muttered Tredway quite audibly. The little sea lawyer was shivering, in spite of the grog, but the grog had given him courage, and that let loose his swivel-hung tongue. "'E's makin' it up, he is. The Lor' says—"

"Through our Lord Jesus Christ—" Groves went on, pushing a stiff forefinger into Tredway's skinny chest and capsizing him among the mates.

"Get a move on and let him slide!" said Ringlin sharply. Groves gave him a reproachful glance, impudently trading upon his present employment, which Ringlin silently vowed to get square for later on. The men's bare heads were powdered with snow. They shuddered in the biting wind. Chips and the bosun at the head of the hatch cover which supported the body alone seemed to be at ease; perhaps the double tot of rum they had received from the steward had more to do with that than any influence the late reverend Groves' reading might have. At the second mate's sharp interruption they lifted the bier a foot or so, tilting it almost to the point where the corpse must slide from under the flag. Tredway started forward choking with a fearful gasp of apprehension. The ship sped along. There was no suggestion of backing mainyards for the Greek. Ice tinkled and crackled all along the ship's sides.

"That it may be like His glorious body—" intoned Groves, nose in air, eyes looking down upon the pages of the Book he could not read. And then the ship rolled. The body slid. The folds of the flag rippled as the corpse passed under it, and over the side it went, before Chips or the bosun knew it, and Tredway ran to the rail and glared after it white-faced.

"He never said no prayer. He never said Amen!" he squealed. "Pore bloke gets dumped just like a sack o' spuds, just like I said. Bad'll come of it. You see." Tredway was standing on the only spare spar left, staring along the track of the ship among the ice cakes. He yelped suddenly, like a dog that is hurt, and his shipmates ran to his side growling.

"There! Look!" Tredway squealed, one skinny hand outflung astern.

Fast as the ship sped, and thick though the snow drove, before distance cast a merciful curtain between them the men of the flying *Kestrel* could see a broad raft of ice swirling from under the ship's counter, bearing upon it the long canvas bundle which was the Greek.

MEN trooped into the forecastles, those off watch. Others resumed the dreary grind at the pumps. Groves went aft to report his duty done and to receive the second portion of his double tot of rum. Tredway crept into his bunk and buried his head under the damp blanket, biting the straw pillow to smother his weeping. It was Groves who uncovered him, and started to reason with him out of the wisdom engendered by two stiff hookers of forty over-proof rum. And Tredway had lost all his sea-lawyer volubility. He listened to Groves for fifteen minutes without a reply, choking back sobs of nervous terror, until Norris, only partly thawed out yet, roughly bade him clap stoppers on to his weeper, and advised Groves to keep his sermonizing for the next funeral.

"If your buddy hadn't been so damned slow, it would have been a real funeral this time: Orson's funeral," Groves retorted loftily. He really floated high upon a roseate cloud of rich Jamaica sugar spirit. "Only Godwin's flannel feet saved Orson and killed the Greek. Good shipmate, too, the Greek was. Many's the time he stood my wheel."

Godwin laughed contemptuously. He had just succeeded in convincing Norris that he had tried to save Orson: out of no love for the skipper, but simply on the impulse of a decent sailorman who admires grit in a man and hates steel in the settlement of a grievance unless both parties wield it.

"If I had been any quicker the Greek would have died quicker, that's all," he said. "Remember that, too, any of you bold buckos who might think some time of jumping the Old Man. He's a he-man, Orson is, and nobody puts steel to him while I'm within jumping distance, unless he starts something himself. The Greek tried to murder him."

"God's truth, and why wouldn't he?" screamed Tredway in frenzy. "Ain't he a hellion? Ain't he working our guts out, and starvin' us, and freezin' us o' cold? And ain't the pore bleedin' Greek a-sailin' this blessed minute atop o' the sea wivout a prayer said over 'im? 'E'll sail 'til the albatrosses picks 'is bones clean, 'e will, an' then the soul of 'im 'll go into a shark as 'll foller this here ship 'til some pore bloke falls overboard and—"

"Hush!" Groves soothed the little man, patting his head paternally. "We must bear and forbear, my son. The Father above is looking down upon us—"

"Wot do I care?" Tredway squealed fiercely. "Wot good do that do us? 'E only looks sideways on the likes o' us pore blighters. If we wuz men, we—"

"Sh! I can not listen to such talk." Groves put on a great assumption of probity and righteousness. There was nothing he wanted more than to hear the crew express their hatred of Orson and weariness of the ship. But he wanted the expression to be unanimous and spontaneous, so that there might be no doubt about it. And while Norris and Godwin remained aloof to suggestions of active discontent, the time was not fully ripe. He did know, however, or believed he knew, how to stir the two young seamen into a different frame of mind, and he had his chance now, when a young ordinary seaman staggered in carrying the breakfast coffee-kettle and bread-barge. The lad slammed both down on a sea chest.

"Ain't nothink else, only cawfee and hardtack," he said dully.

"Wot?" yelped the sea lawyer, aroused out of his dismals by any cause for complaint. "No 'ash?"

"HARDTACK and cawfee, th' doctor sez," the lad retorted, filling his own pannikin with bitter coffee, and drawing no wordy penalty from his elders, all too stricken to notice.

"I'll see about it," snarled Tredway, and started for the door bound aft.

"Better not," Groves advised him, holding on to the little man's shirt. Groves was still full of the warmth and elation of the rum, and felt tremendously superior to his place just then. He was filled with a benevolent paternalism toward his fellows; but he wanted to be the pater in his own way, and that way led toward the gentle coercion of Norris and Godwin away from their astounding and stupid objection to small-ganging Val Orson.

"Better not go aft about a trifle like food—"

"Trifle? Bloody wars!" howled a hungry sailor who crouched over the breadbarge with unbelieving eyes. "Trifle d'ye call it? Ain't we been starved all the passage? Have we ever got even our full whack, leave alone anything over? Now there's no hash, no nothing for breakfast, but bloody cockroach-juice and pantiles! If he won't go aft I will."

"I repeat, you had better not go, my son," Grove insisted gently. "I was aft a while ago. Didn't I get rum for all hands, when I might easily have got it for myself only?"

"He's right. He got us rum," growled the sailor who never said much, with a scowl directed at the grumbler. Groves went on, in a wonderfully suave tone that was calculated to smooth ruffled spirits.

"I was aft, and I heard the steward report that a full cask of beef had been opened and found rotten because the brine had leaked out of it. Eat your biscuit, and be glad the hardtack tank is not empty yet. Didn't you all see when the Old Man was stabbed? Was he ruffled at all? Wasn't he the coolest man in the ship, and just down from six hours aloft, too? D'ye think you won't smell hell if you go to him now? Wait. There'll come the time when you get no beef for dinner, and that'll be the time to brace him. I'll brace him myself, and if I can get rum out of him I can get meat. Patience, my sons, patience."

"Patience! Yer full o' booze, yuh blarsted 'oly bloater! Wot if you ain't got no teeth, same as me?" growled an old man whose bootless feet boasted no other protection from freezing seas than burlap bags wrapped and lashed about them.

"I'd soak my hardtack in coffee, old man," Groves retorted gravely; but under the gravity was elation. Other men were growling. Norris and Godwin looked blackly at the cheerless breakfast. A leaven was at work. A leaven of sour protest. And men who had dumbly endured the bitter weeks of cruel labor, of putrid food and bleak, wet, comfortless beds, found themselves now right up against a wall of hardship and hunger which seemed to be the ultimate limit of their docile endurance.

"Yus, soak yer 'ardtack in cawfee and thank the bloomin' Lord yer alive, same as Mister Bleedin' Groves would," squealed Tredway, glaring viciously around the forecastle. "I'm the bleedin' 'ymn-singin' rum swiper!"

Groves rolled into his bunk to get ahead on sleep. He knew it was more than likely that all hands would be called again before the watch was up; but he smiled as he closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO FACES

AT THE end of a long southerly board which brought the ship into fiercer cold, the ice stretched solid as a cliff ahead of her. There was wind to spare. Only the scattered ice kept the seas down. But now the wind shifted to the westward, and the ice to the east and north parted, leaving a wide open channel straight in the course Orsen wanted to go.

"We'll wear ship, mister, and put the muslin onto her," he told the mate. The men still spent dreary hours at the pumps. Some of the ice had battered the old hull very hard. There were men there whose sack-wrapped feet and legs were frozen into huge bundles of indistinguishable ugliness, and beneath the ugliness was agony. Men there were whose hands and feet were raw with cold sores and sea cuts, whose every action was torture. The old seaman who had mourned lack of teeth when forced to eat hardtack alone, now found biscuit soaked in even hot water as much as he could manage to swallow; for scurvy had made its appearance, first revealing itself in the old fellow's puffed and bleeding gums. Yet these men must obey when orders were given, for their lives were in the hands of that cold devil aft, who alone could bring them safely out of the frozen fastnesses the ship had been forced into.

"Ready to wear ship! Hands aft and brail in the spanker!" the mate roared; and at the same time Ringlin led a gang to the main clew-garnets to haul up the main sail. The crojick was already stowed. Orson himself watched the helm, and as the ship fell off before the stiff breeze, the after yards were braced and the foreyards and head-sails swung and shifted until the wind was on the other side and the old *Kestrel* gathered speed to the northward with a howling beam wind.

"Put the courses to work, mister, and get the topgallants'ls and stays'ls on her," Orson ordered. And men trooped sullenly from rope to rope at the heels of mates who tried to show enthusiasm in the face of another prospect of cruel over-driving of the wracked ship. With the wind strong and increasing, and the sea rising as the ice diminished, the ship leaned down to leeward and groaned with the burden of water-soaked timber within her holds. She was less quick to recover than she had been at the beginning of the passage. Water had swashed among her freight too long. And every added pound of sail pressure increased the terrific drag of her burden.

"Get a move on with the canvas, mister, and pump her clear of water," snapped the skipper. He stood at the poop rail, his knuckles white with the stress of his grip. A black frown darkened his gaze. Every few minutes he glanced at the rushing water alongside. From time to time, when another sail had been sheeted home, hoisted and trimmed, he strode aft to look at the patent log dial. Tredway stood at the wheel, blue and shivering, and terror had as much to do with his state as the cold. Every time Orson passed him, glancing into the binnacle as he stepped to the taffrail to see the log, the virulent little sea-lawyer's lips moved soundlessly; as if rehearsing some depths of legal warning in case Orson should find harsh fault with the steering. And it seemed possible that Tredway's fears might materialize, for the ship had a strong true gale abeam, and she could steer a compass course quite easily if only the proper hand was on her wheel. But Orson appeared to find nothing amiss with the steering. He nodded when the last upper staysail was set and sheeted home. The cold gray seas rushed along her side; the fly-wheel of the log spun so fast that the spokes disappeared and the thing looked like a transparent disk.

Then Orson left the ship to the care of the mate, and went into the chart-room. The men of both watches, still keeping Kalashie watch, split themselves into three gangs, and one gang began the dreary grind of pumping. But there was no chantey raised. Bitter water froze about the men's feet. At each thump of a windward sea, heavy sprays flew athwart the ship, and froze where they fell. The men at the windward pump wheel were speedily coated in glittering mail. The higher flying sprays struck rigging and sails, and the drops as they froze formed stalactites that grew fast enough for growth to be visible, and kept men in fear of their falling when grown to perilous weight.

IT WAS the third day of hardtack breakfasts. Supper had also been cut down. Every other day a small pan of hash was made for each watch; but the meat was bad, the hardtack crawling with weevils; the preserved vegetables had never been very good, and now they were moldy. Mr. Martin was used to driving crews. He had heard every sort of growl a sailorman could put up. Most growling he took as part of his job, and quite as part of the deep-water sailor's personality. On that last record-breaking passage from the East he had seen men driven to frenzy by Orson's methods; but at least there had been no real shortage of food then. Now even that cabin went short of many things hitherto considered necessaries. Martin knew that Orson and Nancy themselves had only the same food as the mates. Nancy might contrive some little change of diet out of sheer ingenuity, but the base was the same as all the afterguard had; and the steward had repeatedly said, in answer to complaints of one or other of the mates, that all the food in the ship came out of one stock. There were no grades, no different qualities.

"He ought to serve rum once a day anyhow. There's plenty," Martin muttered to himself when a sudden blast of rising wind made him shiver, and a sheet of spray that was frozen when it hit flew over the rail and drenched and cut the toiling wretches at the pumps.

"I hopes the swine goes to a Rooshian hell, where boilin' brimstone freezes!" screamed the old, old man whose scurvied gums had gotten him no pity. He still labored at the pumps with the rest, though scarcely able to keep his feet. And Groves chided him, in a voice to be heard above the whine of the wind and the roar of the leaping seas:

"Raise not thy voice against thy lawfully appointed master, but endure the cross for his name's sake!"

The frenzied old sailorman squealed like a wounded animal, let go the pump brake and tottered over to Groves, raising both hands high and bringing them down with pitiful anger upon his tormentor's shoulder, missing his head. Groves dodged, and laughed contemptuously. The old chap fell forward, and collapsed among the drenched and frozen legs of his shipmates, ill beyond all bearing.

"What's the matter with that man?" the mate shouted.

"Dying of starvation and hardship!" Groves bawled back.

"Take him for'ard— Not all of you! Two can carry him. Pump, the rest o' you!"

Martin watched the men stagger into the forecastle with the sick man. He wanted to tell Orson about it; to suggest some leniency for the driven crew. But he hesitated. Val Orson sat at the chart table, his head on one hand, a pair of dividers in the other hand, and there was a heavy frown on his brow. The *Kestrel* was many days behind a record now, after being forced so far to the southward. And all that extra distance had still to be made up. As he sat there, with the port light behind his head, he presented an aspect which had no attractions for Martin. The mate was not much given to deep thought where his captain was concerned. He had known Orson some time, had seen his ways and knew his tremendous capacity for trouble making. He had not cared to examine very closely into Orson's apparent moods for a long time. He stood there, outside the deck-house companionway in which was the chart-room, and only half glanced inside, carefully keeping outside Orson's range of vision until he could make up his mind to enter and beard the lion in his den.

"Read the log, mister!"

Martin started sharply. Orson spoke without moving, and in a level, matter-of-fact tone which plainly said he had been aware of Martin's presence all the time.

"Well?"

The word was shot out. Martin at last moved out of his startled halt, and hurried to the taffrail. And before he moved back he made quite sure that he had read the log correctly. When he reported the mileage to Orson he blurted out the news about the sick man, and stated his opinion that the men were too hard driven. Orson did not turn upon him as he half expected. Orson did not look up until he had jotted down the log reading and measured the distance off with rulers and dividers on the chart. Then he glanced quickly at Martin.

"Go for'ard and see what's the matter with that man," he said. "If it's anything serious tell me. If not, put the old soldier back to work. And tell that man Groves to take a round turn with his long tongue, or I'll shorten it for him."

THE mate went forward between sprays, and wonder was predominant in his mind. Orson had not broken out in furious vituperation. He had spoken quietly. His gaze was only a trifle grim; not at all menacing. Martin wondered if the skipper could be getting sick. Then he reached the forecastle, entered, and in one minute was running aft with tight lips. He forgot to stop and give Groves the skipper's message.

"It's scurvy!" he jerked out, filling the chart-room doorway. Orson looked sharply at him, and carefully weighted down the chart with books and rulers before standing up.

"I suppose you know what scurvy's like, mister?"

"Ay, as well as any man!" Martin retorted. There was something rather terrible in the thought of scurvy falling upon that ship with her ill-nourished crew and her hell-bent commander driving Hornwards through the bitter seas of the South. He did know what scurvy was like, too. He had seen plenty of it. The very idea of it might well make any man shudder in that ship.

"Did you tell the man Groves what I told you to?"

"I forgot, sir," stammered Martin, puzzled at Orson's attitude. Why did the man stop to bother about Groves, when scurvy was breeding in his ship. Orson buttoned his watch coat.

"I'll send Groves aft to you. Tell him. I'll look at the scurvy case myself," he said.

Men bent over their pumping when somebody growled that the Old Man was coming forward. Orson rarely left the poop. For a swift instant Groves had roseate visions of arousing the whole crowd to jumping in and doing what the Greek failed lamentably to do on the very last occasion when Orson went forward. Then Orson paused by the pumps, and Groves was staggered to hear himself addressed.

"Go aft to the mate, Groves. He has something for you that'll do you good," Orson remarked, and Groves hurried away with a wide grin of anticipation to the envy of his mates. The skipper went on and entered the forecastle. He was there no longer than the mate had remained. But Groves was back at the pumps when he returned aft, and there was no grin on the once reverend's face behind the skipper's back; there was evil and threat.

"Have that sick man brought aft," Orson ordered when he reached the poop. And while Martin, himself dazed with astonishment, told off men to obey the astounding order, Val Orson went below and made the steward and Nancy prepare a spare berth for a hospital.

"Got any potatoes left, steward?" he asked.

"A few little withered 'uns, sir. I was keepin' 'em for the missus's hash."

"Got any lime-juice? Or vinegar?"

"Ain't no lime-juice, sir. Plenty o' vinegar, though, and mighty sour it is too. Two voyages old."

"Get a couple of potatoes, and some vinegar. Nancy, you'll have to nurse a sick old man who's likely lousy too. Give him a wash first. I'll tell you what to treat him with. And steward, how much sugar is there, or molasses?"

"There's them two bags o' bad sugar you got in Java, sir. Them as got wet. Ain't much molasses left. Ain't much good sugar, neither."

The old sailor was carried aft while Orson was crushing to pulp two wrinkled potatoes. Fear sat heavily upon the ancient shellback's pained face when Orson bent over him, examining him in the brighter light of the cabin.

"Open your mouth."

Tremblingly the swollen gums parted. They were bleeding, and receding from the few yellow teeth remaining in them. Orson took the potato-juice on his fingers and began to rub the gums. Wherever his finger pressed the impression remained. There was no resiliency in the sick flesh. But the old man greedily licked at the juice, swallowing all he could get. A painful greediness for raw potatoes was in his filmy eyes. When all the pulp and juice were used up, Orson straightened up.

"Look after him now, you two," he told Nancy, indicating the steward with a nod. "Get him clean first. Then see that he takes half a glass of vinegar and sugar every time you feed him, and feed him flour gruel. Give him a shot of rum, hot, before he goes to sleep for the night. And steward, 'til further orders, serve out to all hands a tot of rum every noon, but make 'em drink a whack of vinegar and sugar first. See they drink it, mind."

ORSON went to the chart-room, and Martin found himself casting frequent glances inside. As Orson sat scanning the log book, or reading over for the hundredth time some part of Maury's passage book, or for minutes at a time gazing up through a window at his ship's lofty towers of spar and canvas, he presented a picture which Martin for the first time found fascinating. Martin believed he knew Val Orson well. When he sailed from port on this second voyage with him, he knew he was going on a voyage which would be no bed o' roses or chapel of ease. And he had believed that Orson was simply and only a driver, a bucko, a man-killer for no other reason than sheer callousness and love of power over men. Now he wondered if that estimate was correct.

Where Orson sat, the light of a porthole was right behind his head, and the resulting profile was sharp and vivid. There were high lights on the nose and forehead, and the strong chin; the deep, keen eyes reflected lights whenever they were raised to look aloft. Orson had removed his sealskin cap; his hair was rumpled and unruly. There was a tinge of gray here and there among the black. Strongly lined that face was, at the corners of the eyes, at the ends of the mouth, beside the nose. Yet, just at that moment, Martin could see nothing of brutality there.

There was a great deal of the eagle in that face; but nothing of the vulture. Martin dared not linger there, staring. He paced the poop, keeping a sailorly eye over the ship, the sea, and the weather; watching the steering, careful that the pumping gang kept at work. But at every turn he paused for a brief moment, and glanced again at the face against the port-hole. And the more he looked, the less he wondered at Orson's action toward the old seaman sick of the scurvy. He wondered, actually, why he ever thought Orson tough, and hard, and cruel. There, in Val Orson's daytime face, dwelt pride, if pride ever dwelt in any man's face. There, too, dwelt affection. Yearning was there. And even Martin, dull though he was in such matters, could detect the object of them all. Even Martin was not fool enough to think that Orson was coming into tender mood over Nancy Prouse. No, this was some deeper, vaster love that thralled Val Orson. It, or the object of it, had deepened those lines on his grim face. It, or the object of it, eradicated from that face at that instant all suggestion of brutality, evil, or callousness.

"Crazy about the ship!" muttered Martin at last. "Damned if I don't believe he says his prayers to her picture!"

Mr. Martin's musings were summarily ended by Orson's abrupt appearance at his side as he turned at the after end of his short walk. Bareheaded and without his coat the skipper was; and he faced the stinging wind and spray as if it were summer breeze and morning mist.

"How is the water, mister? Gaining still?" he inquired.

"The fresh gang cleared her, sir. They just about hold it down when fresh, and it gains on them toward the end of their spell."

"Change gangs oftener. And go along once in a while and see they're not sojering. There's men enough in this ship to eat her. Set the main royal and flying jib when Ringlin comes on deck. The ship hasn't a chance, the way she's handled."

"Yes, sir," Martin replied. But as Orson went into the companionway to go below the mate dashed his cap on the deck, glared after him, and muttered:

"Oh, you beauty! You sweet-scented hellion! The way she's handled! Men enough to eat her! That's about all they get to eat. It's your other face you showed me then, damn and blast your guts!"

CHAPTER XIX

NANCY SINGS

ORSON looked in at the sick man when he went below. The old sea warrior was asleep, uneasily asleep, as if even unconsciousness could not make him forget his troubles. Or perhaps he could not forget that Val Orson, the driving hellion, had brought him aft into the cabin; perhaps the wonder of that could not wipe out the fear that some dark motive underlay the action. Orson frowned, then grimaced, to see this ancient bit of sea-broken humanity lying clean and warm in a cabin bunk; for Nancy had gone the limit in her ministrations, and one of Orson's own shore-going silk shirts clung to the withered old body, moving flutteringly to the uneven, scanty breathing. A sheet was on the bed, too. Orson knew the *Kestrel* boasted no sheets other than those of his own bed, and only enough of those to supply a change while Nancy washed the soiled ones.

But the skipper made no noise. He closely scrutinized this first scurvy patient, willing that Nancy should have her way if only she prevented the spread of the dread disease. The old man's eyes were sunken; his tough old skin had turned dusky. There was a strongly fetid odor on his breath, and a trickle of blood was at the nostrils. Orson turned away looking worried; for he recognized symptoms which ordinarily appeared only in advanced cases. At the door of his own room he paused, his hand not yet upon the handle; for he heard an unusual sound within; the sound of singing. Nancy was singing.

He opened the door quickly, and stared at the girl as if she had been dumb and now spoke for the first time. Poor Nancy stopped singing as the door opened, and she met Orson's stare with a frightened blush.

"Sing up," he laughed. "What're you stopping for?"

But Nancy had no more song in her. She was confused at being caught singing; she busied herself with the work she was doing, while Orson sat on the settee and tried to kick off his sea-boots. Nancy was making a nightshirt for the sick man out of several pieces of soft material she had found among Orson's varied store; relics of past lights o' love. He saw the stuff, and grinned not very pleasantly.

His boots were tight. Long hours in them had swollen his feet.

"Get down here and haul these boots off, girl," he said sharply. Nancy laid down her work and knelt before him, struggling with the wet, cold, clinging boots while he regarded her bowed figure somberly.

"Why don't you sing?" he demanded. She almost fell over, what with the lurching of the ship and the sudden giving of the first boot.

"I can't sing, Val, I can't really," she replied, bending over the second boot.

"You were making a pretty good stagger at it when I came in. Happy, wasn't you?"

"I was—I—" Nancy stammered. Then the second boot came off, and as she stumbled to her feet the words came in a rush: "It was so good of you to bring old Rogers down here and let me care for him. I didn't expect you'd do anything like that, Val."

ORSON regarded her steadily, his lips tightly pressed together, his brows puckered. She certainly had been singing, and singing far from badly. And he was not at all sure that she was so crazy about nursing moldy old shellbacks that she would be forced to sing over old Rogers, ill of the scurvy. But he had been almost a stranger to Nancy lately. She might have developed many little traits for all he knew. Maybe she was trying to develop so that she might, when pleasant sailing permitted him once more to spend time with her, entertain and amuse him with something more than her mere presence. The thought made him chuckle.

"So making old Rogers comfortable made you sing, did it?" he jested at her. "Can't sing for me, but you can sing over that old forec'stle rat, and put him to bed in my best shirt, too. Well, well!"

"I didn't know I was singing, honest, Val. I was just busy. It has been so lonely down here ever since the bad weather kept you on deck all the time. I thought you didn't care for me any more than you did for the crew. When that old man was brought down for me to take care of I knew then that you were not hard, and cruel, but only too worried and anxious to spare time for me."

"Your notions are a mite off the course, Nancy," Orson laughed, stretching himself at full length on the setee. "I want Rogers cured, if he's curable, and I don't want the scurvy to spread. But don't get the notion that I care one good —— damn for the sojering rascals for'ard. This ship's going to be driven to a record, if I live; and I need every man I can keep alive to drive her."

Nancy picked up her work again.

"Put that down," he told her gruffly. "Come here beside me, and I'll tell you some bedtime stores before I fall asleep."

Nancy knelt beside the settee, and he put an arm about her shoulders. She nestled there, her head upon his breast, and her breast close against his side. Her face was turned from his, and with his free hand he played with her hair, roughly, heedless of her trembling. The interior of the cabin was drumming with sound. Seas, gale, stress of spars and rigging, all combined to raise a throbbing chorus of sonorous harmony that was music indeed to Orson's ears. He knew exactly when a blast tried the lofty mainroyalmast to the limit. He knew the moment when the blast diminished, and left the royal still unburst. Once he heard the officer of the watch shout the order to stand by the mainroyal halyards, and almost upset Nancy in the instant when he was about to rush on deck and forbid that the order be carried out. But he settled down to rest after all while the *Kestrel* stormed north like a frightened thing of life, hounded before the frozen seas that leaped white-fanged at her quarters.

AND so he slept falling into a doze in the midst of the most wakeful of all his stories, weary to death after long, bitter vigil. Nancy gently released herself, straightened his pillow, and softly spread a blanket over him. Then she lowered the light, and went out to prepare vinegar and sugar for old Rogers.

When she came back she got hot water from the pantry and began to remove the dressing from the knife wound in Orson's throat. It was almost healed, now, but the man's very activities prevented entire closure, and Nancy still dressed it twice a day, usually while he dozed. He would send her off with a muttered curse if she tried to take off the dressing while he was awake. Now she had not been able to attend to it for almost twenty-four hours, and a little blood had soaked through the absorbent pad. Gently dabbing it with water, she removed it bit by bit; and it stuck, twitching the flesh so that it bled afresh.

Swiftly, from the depths of sleep, his hand gripped hers. His eyes opened, and the wariness of the hunted beast was in them. Poor Nancy was greatly frightened; but she was more hurt, and even as his eyes opened her warm lips dabbed a furtive kiss on the wound, and her free hand went impulsively to his head, there to smooth and caress the unruly hair that tumbled about his temples. His eyes flickered, and slowly closed again in sleep, while his deep chest heaved once in a quivering breath. The hand with which he had gripped hers retained its grip; but it relaxed some of the fierceness; when he slept it had become nothing more than a confiding grasp.

WHILE the ship reeled and thundered through the steep cold seas that make the great southern ocean a region of dread, with cursing men keeping her afloat by dint of sheer pumping, with mates converted to the mad driving of the master they still believed to be a little insane, Val Orson slept the heavy slumber of the physically exhausted; and Nancy crouched on the floor beside him, held by his hand, her own drowsy head once more fallen upon his breast, in slumber almost as deep as his.

And a trickle of water ran across the floor from beneath the port. The sheathing of the cabin worked with the ship's stress. Every piece of old, old wood groaned and squealed. The trickle of water formed a pool of slop under the carpet. It reached and soaked Nancy's dress. Little driblets of water fell from the beams overhead. Where the bulkhead joined the deck-head, a long splinter was working out under the terrific squeezing. It fell at last: fell into the sopping pool.

Overhead, out on the deck, the bells tinkled their half hours. The gale roared its moments of punctuation; but no more was there any voice heard ordering men to stand by to take in the mainroyal. The ship reeled, the ship plunged, staggering to the shock of seas, but she carried her canvas as long as it held together; and her master slept.

CHAPTER XX

A SUBJECT IS BROACHED

WHEN he found an hour of leisure, the steward gave some attention to his storerooms. In broaching the last cask of beef he had seen that the stupendous lurching of the ship had tumbled his stores into confusion. He asked the mate for men to stow the goods; and four were sent to help him, among them Groves. From time beyond memory the stowing of sea stores in midocean has been a welcome job to forecastle hands. Nearly always there would be an open box of raisins, or cabin biscuit, or dried apples—something worth while stealing. Sometimes the steward was a decent sort, and winked at the little thieveries. Then the men commonly took reasonable toll. Sometimes there was a crab of a steward, and the robbery was as great as human ingenuity could make it. In the *Kestrel* there was a decent steward, all things considered; but there were no stores worth the stealing. The job was hard. There were so many wide open spaces in the *Kestrel's* lazaret that barrels, boxes, bags and cans had to be hauled and stowed at one end from all corners, and chocked and wedged off with planking. The planks had to be brought from on deck. The ship flung the men and stores about down in the dark and clamorous little cubby hole; and they growled. To help them along, the steward gave them grog; rich, powerful rum straight from the jug; and Groves assumed the position of leader of the gang. He persuaded them to do a good job, and the steward was well pleased when they finished and left him.

"What y' get, matey?" one man asked another, when all returned to the forecastle. "I got a tin o' somethink. Dunno what."

"I got a lot o' funny stuff. Like a bundle o' moldy pipestems. Wot's it good fer? 'Tain't grub, is it?"

"My good lads! Surely you did not steal from that kind steward?" Groves broke in, edging into the little group and putting an eagle eye upon the loot. "Shocking! I got nothing. Let me see."

The fourth man crowded in. He had got nothing either. Share and share alike was usual. He knew that Groves would see to the division. Groves was examining the tin. He knew what the moldy pipestems were.

"You can chew on that stuff when you're really hungry," he grinned. "Macaroni, it's called. It's food of sorts when it's cooked. Italians use it to whistle for wind when raw. What's in the tin, my lad? No label? Lend me your knife." The can was hacked open. Groves smelled at it, wrinkled his clerical nose, and handed it back with an air of condolence.

"Chicory!"

"What th' hell's that?"

"It's called coffee in the crew list; you know the sort of coffee we get? Well, that's about it. See what comes of stealing."

"Stow yer gab, y' bloody sooner. You didn't get nothink at all. Hey, Bill, gimme some o' them pipestems. A hell of a ship!"

AT THAT moment two thirds of the crew were in the forecastle. The remainder were pumping. One man was at the helm. Chips and the bosun and the sailmaker headed a gang apiece at the pumping. Two of them rested together. And there was no other work done aboard the flying *Kestrel* while she was driven as Orson drove her, unless something carried away and men were needed to secure or replace it. Groves took mental stock of the men below. Sails was on deck. Norris was at the wheel. Godwin was in the pumping gang. Those three were the only ones in a wonderful scheme that had been cooking in the fertile brain of Groves for many a bitter day. The trouble was, they were three very awkward men to handle, if they did not want to be handled.

No man had dared to bring Norris or Godwin to a face-to-face argument. Without ever having tried to establish themselves as such, they were easily leaders of the men in everything pertaining to seamanship; and in the few moments of challenge, they had stood fast enough so that no open contest had ever materialized. Groves knew ways and means of handling such men when the time came; but they were better out of the way until then. Sails was an older man. But he was one of the fine old seadogs bred in the racing clippers of stuns'ls, ringtails, and moons'ls. He was sixty years old, but worth three men yet in any emergency calling for courage and man power. That is, once the shore fog was out of his brain. He would never have been in the *Kestrel* had he been as good a man ashore as he was at sea.

Groves went to his bunk, thumping Tredway in the ribs on the way.

"Get up, and stand by," he said.

Then he unrolled the heavy clothing he had worn while aft with the steward, which he had thrown into his bunk on coming below. From the folds he dragged a gallon jar of rum. Down in the lazaret, the steward kept his drawn stores like that. A full jug and one in use, taken from the main store in the cask which only he and the skipper had the key to.

Groves filled his own hookpot with rum, swallowed a good full ration himself, and called Tredway.

"Swig on this, little man, and if your tongue must wag let it not wag concerning the source of good things," he said, sticking the hookpot under Tredway's nose.

Tredway swigged, his eyes popping and his gullet surging. When the tears left his eyes he whispered huskily:

"Wot's the 'ookum? Goin' to start somefing?"

"Come into the circle," said Groves.

In the circle, where two men still cursed the captain and steward of a ship the stores of which produced to thieves no better than moldy pipestems and coffee-wood-dust, Groves suddenly thrust his rum, and faces brightened. Men who had never bothered to leave their bunks at the chance of sharing in some lazaret loot, sniffed the aroma of rum and stuck legs and arms out of bunks.

"Where d'ye get it, parson?" Tredway wanted to know.

"Hell, who cares?" growled a sleeper, waking up and snatching the pannikin.

Groves was full of subtlety. He wanted somebody else to be the goat if things failed to break as he desired. Tredway's long tongue was always ready to wag; given the inspiration of a couple of big shots of rum, the little sea lawyer could be depended upon to say plenty.

"Drink hearty, little man," urged Groves, shoving the hookpot at Tredway again. The grog went around. Soon it would be time to relieve the pumping gang. Groves wanted something started.

"Don't sip it, drink like a man," he urged, and Tredway took a long swallow, and stuttered, his eyes streaming, and his throat almost withered.

"Yer damn right I'm a man! 'Oo sez I ain't? Bli'me, if you blokes was half the men I and Groves is, that bleedin' rotter aft wouldn't be bullydamning us at this minit. Men!"

"That's you, Tredway. That's the stuff to give 'em. Have a drink," Groves murmured sympathetically. And the little gutter-snipe Cockney emptied the mug, waved it, and embarked fairly on a torrent of hate. He told the men all they already knew, all he believed they ought to know, all he felt he knew himself, which was far more than all the rest combined.

"An' you sit like figger'eads, lettin' 'im starve us, an' freeze us, an' drive us like bleedin' mokes, while there's grub an' clo'es, an' fire, an' grog aft there—"

"Good fer you, mate," a willing listener broke in. "Let's have a swig o' that rum now, parson. Tredway's right. C'm on, give's a swig."

"Go easy, lads. There are men outside who need warming. Touch the pot lightly, and it'll go around." Groves filled the pannikin again, drinking first, then seeing that Tredway got a good ration before it went around.

"An' that Judy," Tredway went on, coughing. "I got me eye on Nancy, I 'ave. I knows how to treat a smart Judy like 'er. You blokes 'elp yerselves when Orson's downed, and leave the gal to me."

"I'll take care of Nancy," Groves cut in with a knowing laugh. "I've never collected the kiss I should have got when I married her. Carry on, Tredway. You were saying—"

"You're both too smart about the gal," growled the sailor who never said much. "If anything comes of this boozy palaver, it'll be share and share alike, and that means the Judy too."

SOME fierce flurry of icy wind carried forward the ting-tang of the bell; and right on the heels of it Godwin appeared in the doorway.

"Rise and shine, me sons. Pump or perish. Shake a leg and relieve better men."

He was covered in ice from the top of his sou'wester to the toes of his sea-boots, and as he paused a moment in the doorway he flogged his hands to warm them. His eyes could not at once penetrate the forecastle gloom; but he sniffed, curiously; and Tredway kept on chattering. Godwin grinned.

"Whose birthday? Where do I come in?"

"Shut yer mouth!" squealed Tredway. "You don't come in nowhere, you and yer bleedin' pal wot was goin' to see 'ow tough—"

"Hush, little man. It's my birthday, not yours. Have a swig, Godwin," Groves interrupted. There was no good in antagonizing Godwin. Some of the hands were getting noisy. It was not yet time to tell them to refuse to pump. "I want to stay below for a few minutes after the watch is changed, Godwin, to give your gang a snort of rum. You don't mind carrying on for me, hey?"

"Make it snappy then," grumbled Godwin. No man wanted to get an overdose of that misery at the pumps; but Groves' grog still reeked in his nose, and he couldn't refuse. "Give you ten minutes for another swig at that hookpot."

Godwin swigged, and stared with wonder at the men staggering into their oilskins and boots on the reeling deck. All talked. Some sang. They cursed, too, far more bitterly and boldly than ever before on the voyage.

"Won't take the mate long to smell a rat there," Godwin said, wiping his lips with a briny hand. "Where'd they get it?"

"Never mind that now," Groves said, a bit anxious now that the gang were tumbling out on deck, still vociferously talking or singing. Tredway's thin, vehement voice might have been heard clear aft in the Old Man's stateroom.

"Go with them, Godwin, there's a good fellow. Make 'em start a chantey if they must sing. The mate won't kick at that."

Godwin led the gang out; the relieved gang came into the forecastle. Groves met them with a brimming hooker of blood-warming liquor that surprised them, while the men who would go out for the next spell at the pumps talked loudly and liquorishly, eying Groves in hope of getting more. But Groves meant to make the most of his loot. He ministered to the frozen gang just in from the deck, and only talked disconnectedly about Tredway's notions meanwhile.

"That's what Tredway said, isn't it, mates?" He watched Norris closely. Norris was swigging long and luxuriously at the hookpot. "Tredway can't see why a big crowd of good men, like this crowd, stands for Orson's driving and bedevilling, when here's a smart fast ship that'll fetch good money anywhere along the South American coast. Starving here, and freezing while Orson lives aft along with that pretty Judy and laughs at us—"

"You got a hell of a hope, you have," said Norris, giving back the hookpot. The rest of the men who had heard Tredway raised an uproar against Norris; the newly relieved gang swiftly leaped in, taking sides. Groves stowed away his jug, scrambled into his outer clothing, and went out to take his place at the pump wheel, smiling reflectively. Godwin grinned at him.

"I got 'em singing all right," Godwin said.

AFT Mr. Ringlin listened in a dull sort of surprise to the howling of a pumping chantey. That was the last thing he expected to hear from that crowd in that bitter weather. Godwin and Norris, of all that gang, might have ventured to help out inevitable labor with a song. But this was Tredway singing the solo, and in a voice full of amazing vigor.

"Only one more day, my Johnny—"

And there was more than mere chorusing in the yelp of the rest. There was spirit.

"One, more, day!
Oh come rock and roll me over!
One, more, day!"

Mr. Martin came back on deck, unbelieving. Ringlin grinned.

"Don't you hear that old man bawling?
One, more, day!
Oh come rock and roll me over!
One, more, day."

"They'll stand watching!" grunted Mr. Martin.

"Hell, let 'em sing. A singin' sailor's a safe sailor," Ringlin retorted.

"Don't you hear them gals a-calling?
One, more, day!
Oh come rock and roll me over,
One, more, day."

"There's more than singing in that," Mr. Martin declared; then before he could say more Orson came on deck, his eyes holding at first a cold, cruel glitter, which soon turned into a gleam of almost amusement.

"That's where it went, hey?" he remarked coolly, and turned to look at the helmsman. That ill-clad sailorman sweat at the wheel. The storming clipper demanded all his attention. Overpressed as she was, it was only by closest watching she could be prevented from broaching when her leebow was buried deeper than usual. And the green following seas roared perilously near to the stern fairleads. Any crest that got a good start and met no ice on its way was more than likely to rise just that much higher and crash aboard the poop. It was no time for indifferent steering. It was no time to trust any but proven men. The two mates glanced at each other inquiringly; they had to wait for Orson himself to tell them what he meant by the remark he uttered on stepping out of the companionway.

"The steward missed a full jug of rum after those swine finished in the lazaret. They were given rum, too," Orson said. His eyes hardened again as he sought out certain of the men at the pumps. Then he astonished the mates again.

"Take the helm, Mister Martin, and you'll stand trick and trick with him, Ringlin. I'll keep the deck until they stop singing and get cool again." And when the helmsman shambled past, looking bewildered at being relieved by the chief mate without one word of censure, Orson halted him and spoke to him too:

"Here, you! Go for'ard and tell those men I just gave the steward orders to issue grog twice a day. They stole it, so they can drink it up while they've got it. They'll get no more when that's gone. And if they don't like it, they can bloody well lump it. Let 'em come aft and see me."

The sailor trotted along, to tell his mates a strange yarn of the mad skipper, so softened that he meant to take no fierce vengeance upon the men who stole his rum.

The singing at the pumps lacked vigor long before the spell was done. The relieving gang did not sing. The men who stumbled along to the galley next mealtime cast queer glances at the figures on the poop, as if fearful that some designs upon their food were meditated. But Orson had no eye for anything except the way of his flying *Kestrel*.

Aft, three apparently emotionless men kept watch on deck. In the big stateroom below a softly singing girl sat wedged in a corner with pillows and stitched until her eyes could no longer see.

To Be Continued

A Brief and Bitter Anecdote

The LOTTERY TICKET

By John Steuart Erskine

"TO HIM that hath shall be given," say the Scriptures, but Sara, who was neither pious nor literary, understood nothing of that. Her religion was but to give a good meal of tortillas, beans, coffee and goat mutton in exchange for the twenty-five cents gold that she charged. But certainly she would have considered herself among those "that hath," for the eating house, the land on which the house stood, the cows that gave it milk, even the man who brought in the firewood, were hers and no one's but hers.

However, the cup of Sara's happiness was not quite full—in fact, its scanty tide was ebbing as fast as the prosperity of Cayaguina increased. Once she had been the proprietress of the only *posada* in the village; but as the local mines had increased in importance, new hotels had sprung up and had taken the best of the trade, new *estancos* had been opened and had destroyed her monopoly in the sale of cheap government rum. There was more business, and her profits remained much the same as before, but her dignity was sadly diminished. Therefore at times she dreamed of a larger, lighter dining-room, of a servant to help with the cooking, and of a row of bright whisky bottles along a newly painted wall.

On this day Sara was busy with her tortillas. Tirelessly she rolled the crushing stone up and down the maize-filled quern. The day was hot and silent. Alberto her man, was humming a happy little tune from the doorstep, where he sat silhouetted against the blinding light of the street. Outside, little dust whirlwinds dodged between the brown mud houses and scurried away down the street, yellow against the blue shadows of the tiled eaves. In the scanty shadows of a cactus tree panted a dishevelled hen, beak open, wings drooping. As her eyes rested on Alberto, Sara smiled gently, stupidly.

A voice disturbed the heat of the day, a voice distant yet piercing. "The last fat one that remains to me," it begged. "Win the ten thousand pesos." Sara recognized the tones of Exequiel, the local go-getter, who was haranguing a neighbor. There he stood in the blazing sun, his felt hat low over his eyes, the blue lottery ticket in his hands. She saw him pass it to the neighbor and receive money in exchange. Then she turned indifferently back to her work, blinking for a moment to reaccustom her eyes to the darkness of the kitchen.

AGAIN the voice broke in. "Try your luck, Alberto," it rasped. "Here is the last fat one that remains to me. This will win the ten thousand pesos."

Alberto grinned pleasantly. "If I had money—" he began doubtfully.

Exequiel smiled with the persistent good humor which is the chief weapon of his guild all the world over. "Sara has money," he pointed out. "Think what you may be losing, man. Ten thousand pesos!"

Alberto moved his lips uneasily with the thought of all that this money might bring him.

"Sara, my little daughter," he wheedled, "have you any money?" Sara's lips tightened, for she did not like Exequiel.

"No, my soul," she replied moodily.

Exequiel grinned mockingly at Alberto and gestured toward Sara with his chin.

Alberto rose slowly to his feet and stared down on Sara from his great height of five feet nine inches. "My heart," he protested, "think of the money we should lose—ten thousand pesos." But Sara thought only that it would be unkind to deprive Alberto of his little pleasures, of a new toy, a small hope, a new boast, that would keep him happy for another month.

"Buy thyself a part of the ticket, if thou wilt, Alberto," she agreed weakly. Alberto, however, was thinking more of impressing Exequiel with the completeness of his dominance over his woman than of gaining a prize.

"No, my love," he wheedled, "the whole, and we shall share the ten thousand pesos between us."

Unwillingly Sara produced two American one-dollar bills and a Peruvian peso, and the lottery ticket changed hands. Ceremoniously Alberto tore the ticket in two and presented one-half to Sara.

Exequiel moved off down the street through the scurrying dust storms, and a moment later his voice sounded again: "The last fat one that remains to me. Win the ten thousand pesos."

FOR a week Alberto dreamed aloud of his ten thousand pesos; then his hope began to fail him and he talked of one thousand pesos, of hundreds, even of ten pesos. At the end of the third week he came to Sara in search of money. "Only two pesos," he begged, "and I will give you my half of the lottery ticket." She is a poor-spirited woman who will refuse little gifts to her man, especially when he is ten years younger than herself, and Sara gave, took the lottery ticket and forgot.

Men say that love is blind, but that is not so: love is merely unselfish. A fortnight later when Alberto came wheedling to Sara and tried to buy the lottery ticket back from her, she looked him over shrewdly, with the suspicion of thirty-five years of human experience in her eyes. Alberto had money which was in itself suspicious, for certainly he had not been working. Sara stepped to the door and found, as she had expected, Exequiel.

"What was the winning number, Exequiel?" she demanded.

"The prize is not yet run, nina Sara," replied Exequiel politely.

"You lie," said Sara quietly, her Indian eyes black in her mahogany face. "I shall not sell." And she returned to her labors.

"In that case—" said Exequiel, shrugging his shoulders sadly—from his pocket he produced the list of numbers.

She had won the ten thousand pesos.

Alberto would not be comforted. "But for me you would never have bought it," he pleaded. Sara paid no attention. "You tricked me out of it," he stormed. "You bought it from me for less than it was worth, and now you are laughing at me for being deceived. I shall kill myself."

And Sara, looking at him tenderly, knew that he would never hurt a hair of the head of that person whom he loved above all the world—himself; but she saw also his yellow skin and black eyes and frizzy hair and she loved him. Were he to leave her, would she ever find another man so young? She rummaged about in her old purse and brought out the half lottery ticket that she had bought from Alberto, and placed it in his hand.

"Half of what is mine is yours," she said simply.

Alberto snatched the ticket from her hand. "How good thou art!" he exclaimed gratefully, and then he was gone. Sara leaned out of the window and watched his triumphant passage up the street.

"I have won the lottery, I have won the lottery," he shouted to whomever he passed; and because she loved him, Sara smiled happily.

Five thousand pesos! In a day Alberto stepped from being Sara's man to being the richest citizen of Cayaguina. The *alcalde* saluted him in passing, the *comandante* accepted a drink from him. Small wonder that his head began to swell perceptibly. He took on the air of grave self-appreciation which is characteristic of successful financiers all the world over. "What do you intend to do with your money?" he asked Sara one day.

"I shall build a new room onto the *posada*," said she. "I shall buy a ranch and some chickens. With the rest I shall buy land."

Alberto gave a grand gesture of thoughtfulness. "I shall go into business," said he. And Sara's eyes, when she looked at him, were tender and amused as are a young mother's when she watches her babies at play.

THERE were few smiles for Sara during the months that followed. Alberto began to blossom with prosperity. He discarded his sandals for yellow shoes with bumps on the toes, and limped proudly but painfully around the village. He took to high, stiff collars—he who had never before worn a collar. He tucked in his shirt, and sported sun-glasses and a felt hat. He had decided on the real estate business as the proper outlet for his talents, so he bought himself an office and despite Sara's protests went to live in it. Thereafter he came to the *posada* no more, and kind friends told Sara that he had taken Lola Juarez to wife. Sara wept a little into the tortilla flour when no one was by.

Lola Juarez was a girl of about eighteen years. Her curly hair showed her to be a *zamba*—a hybrid between Indian and negro—but the light brown skin of her face suggested a Spanish admixture. She was pretty, vivid, voluptuous; and the vices of her three ancestral races were well blended in her character. For some weeks she filled Alberto's life with pleasure and anxiety. Then she departed for the mountains with a gringo engineer of the mine. Alberto bore his loss bravely with the aid of Pancha, a gay little girl of the village, whom now he took to wife.

Business prospered for Alberto. His office was always full of local celebrities who sat around his table and drank his whisky; but little money changed hands. "There is plenty of time," said Alberto. "Soon the money will come pouring in." Meanwhile he mortgaged his office to the *alcalde* who, in private life, was the local money lender.

One day Lola returned to Alberto and begged him to take her back. The gringo engineer had tired of her and had turned her out. But Alberto rose in wrath. Let her begone, he said hotly. The man who could be weak enough to take back a woman who had been unfaithful to him would be deservedly scorned. So Lola went to live with the *comandante*.

FIVE months after the drawing of the great lottery the *alcalde* foreclosed the mortgage on Alberto's office. Business had not prospered and there was nothing left. Pancha poured a stream of filthy abuse upon Alberto's humbled head, and departed in wrath to her father's house.

Alberto reflected sadly upon the evanescence of glory, as he made his way up the muddy street. The smell of the rains was in the air; the trees were again in leaf. A flock of bedraggled turkeys complained querulously as they picked their way across the mud. At the door of the *posada* Alberto halted. From the kitchen came the monotonous grind of the tortilla stones. He hesitated a moment and then went in.

"Good days, Sara," he greeted.

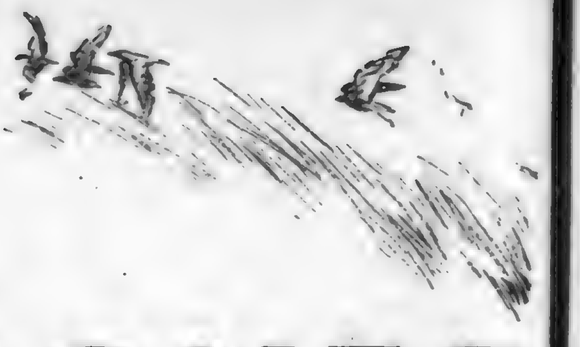
"Good days, Alberto," she replied without looking up, nothing in her face to show that her heart was throbbing painfully with the consciousness of his presence. In the tiles of the roof a cricket was fiddling foolishly.

"May I come back to live here, Sara?" asked Alberto timidly.

She looked him over carefully; the hardness passed from her face and she smiled. Why not? She still loved him; she would always love him.

"Stay," she said indifferently. "But we are all out of firewood. You may take the horse."

Slowly Alberto unbuttoned the high collar of which he was so proud; he stood for a moment with it in his hands, looking at it; then he laid it reluctantly upon the shelf where gleamed the new array of whisky bottles. He glanced at Sara furtively but she was not looking at him. He picked up the ax, sighed sadly, and shuffled out.



MAROONED

A Novelette of Adventure in Australia

By Mary Gaunt

BOTH faces, black and white, expressed unutterable dismay.

"Marooned," said Arnold Doughty wriggling himself into a sitting position.

"I am aghastedly amazed," said Albert Edward struggling with less success to do the same thing.

"You might," said Doughty, "have been dead like the captain and the mate.

Arnold Doughty having taken his degree in science at the Melbourne University, and had a year in Sydney just to see what it was like, was engaged in seeing something of his country before settling down.

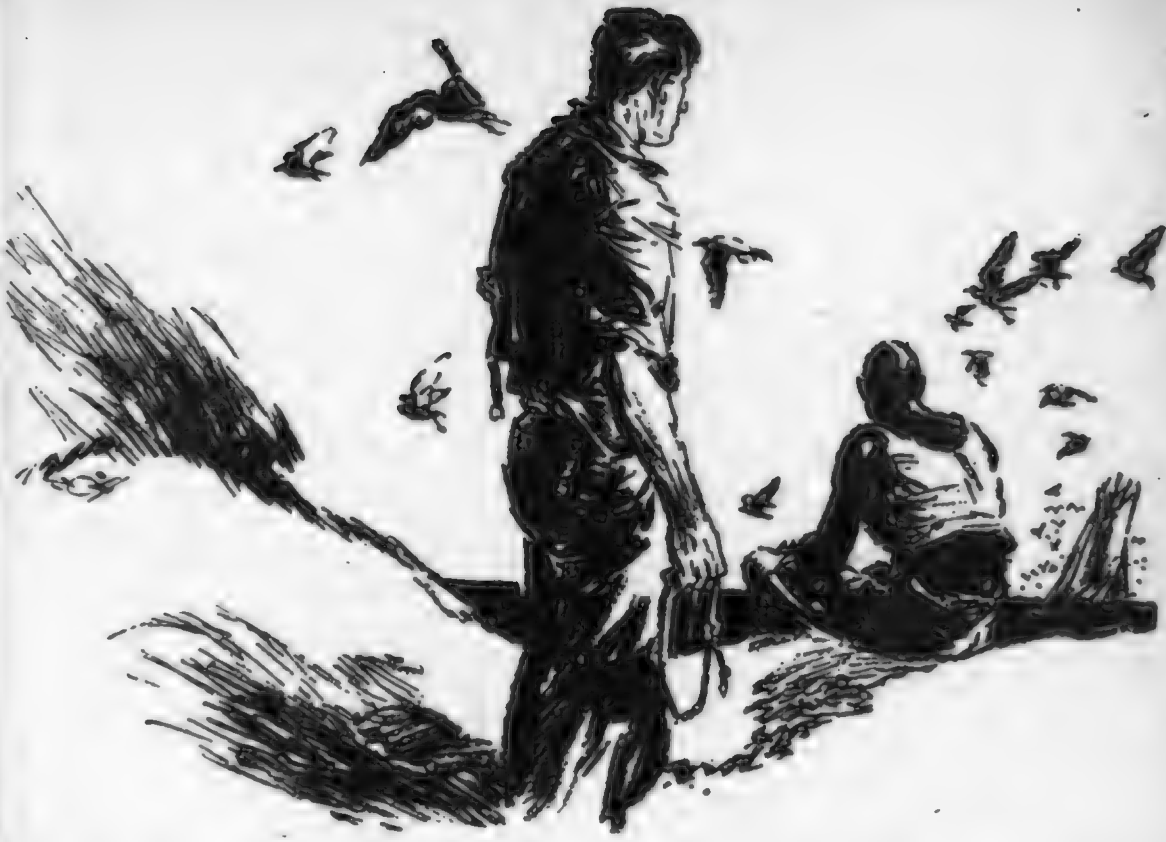
His means were small but he soon found that, dodging along the coast in the little coastal ships that went in and out on their business on the great waters, he saw Australia, primitive, raw Australia, as he could never have seen her under other circumstances. The "copy" he supplied the Melbourne *Argus* was something quite out of the common and was paid for accordingly.

Now he had "copy" in plenty but there was going to be a little difficulty in forwarding it to its destination.

He had been through Whitsunday Passage; along the Great Barrier; through Torres Straits; had been all round the lonely Gulf of Carpentaria; had visited Port Darwin and, after six months had arrived at Windham, the cattle port of the North. There he looked out for a little ship that should take him down the west coast.

The captain of a little schooner, the *Sea Spray*, attracted him. He was a man of education, but a dour sort of man. He had the bearing of an old naval man, had evidently seen many worlds, and his air of culture marked him as different from the ordinary coastal skipper. To Doughty's surprise the older man demurred about taking him. He was bound for Yallo-y-poora, a little inlet where pearling was in its beginnings. He was sure Doughty would find there were interesting places before that which he would be sorry to miss. But he was bound to be at Yallo before the end of the month. He strongly advised Doughty to look for another ship. He reminded him that a man in charge of even a little ship, the only full-blooded white man on board was a very different proposition from the man who yarned and smoked ashore.

But Doughty was not to be dissuaded. Accordingly he embarked and repented before the first day closed in. There was a



half-caste Chinese mate, the captain retired to the chart room with a bottle and the mate was more than ill conditioned—he was brutally cruel.

THE passenger's blood boiled at the way the mate treated the crew, but when he interfered and appealed to the captain that polished English gentleman told him blasphemously to mind his own business and all communications between them ceased.

He was beginning to think that the port, thank Heaven, must be close, when the crew, a picturesque set of pirates, half Chinese and half Malay, who had stood a considerable amount of cruel hazing from the mate, rose and threw both him and the skipper overboard.

Doughty backed by the cook, a negro gentleman, Albert Edward Montague Jones, who hailed from the Gold Coast and wielded a ladle with precision, interfered; but they had come upon the scene too late. The after guard were in the water. The crew armed with knives gave them their entire attention and presently the pair of them found themselves imprisoned in the forepeak and half a dozen hours later they were dumped, bound hand and foot, on a long sandy beach.

The serang, standing over them, made them a long speech which neither could understand and before departing dropped between them, just out of reach of either, the cook's knife.

But a knife to two men bound firmly hand and foot!

Doughty rolled himself over till he reached it. Then he was as far off freedom as ever. The little schooner lay a considerable distance off shore; the boat was making for it; there was not a breath of wind and he was wild with thirst and cramp. The brutal skipper and mate had surely died an easier death.

Then Albert Edward took a hand. He rolled himself with a bump over to his companion in misfortune.

"I implore you, sah," he said: "roll your honor on to your stomach and allow me to attack your bonds with my dental apparatus."

Albert Edward's dental apparatus was an exceedinly good one but it was a considerable time before he had worked through the stout fiber that bound Doughty's arms behind his back. When they were freed the agony was so excruciating he wondered if he would ever again be able to use his hands.

"I agonize also," remarked Albert Edward feelingly and Doughty could well believe it. The painful blood settled a little at last and he made shift to free his companion. While the negro howled with pain he rubbed his own hands and feet and reviewed the situation.

He hadn't much notion where they were. It seemed absurd but he hadn't. Albert Edward gave it as his opinion they were somewhere on the northwest coast of Australia, an opinion which Doughty naturally shared. But Northwest Australia! A wide address in a desolate land. There was the white schooner hull down on the horizon but she might have been on another planet as far as they were concerned.

OVERHEAD the sky was lowering. There were no clouds but it was brazen, reflecting the leaden sea below where there was not the faintest break of white water. They were on a long beach of smooth yellow sand that stretched away on either hand far into the distance. The ocean met that hot yellow sand with the faintest sighing murmur. There was something threatening in the awful calm and silence, the hush that comes when nature herself waits for something terrible.

"I anticipate," said Albert Edward looking solemnly up into the sky, "an atmospheric disturbance threatens that will blow us into Kingdom Come."

Doughty was still rubbing his arms.

"That," he said, "would settle matters. But since we are on the earth for the moment I should be glad to know exactly where and what we may expect from the inhabitants."

"Where the inhabitants should be," said Albert Edward transferring his attentions from his arms to his legs, "am vacuity. We are lords."

"An empty honor and short lived," Doughty struggled to his feet, "unless we come across food and water pretty quickly," and he looked around.

Nothing in sight but the leaden sea and the threatening sky. A featureless land. A depressing outlook. But he heaved an involuntary sigh. Bad as the outlook seemed this freedom alone was a mighty relief after the cramped hours in the dark forepeak. He felt his spirits rising. True he had seen two human beings sent to their long account, one a man he had begun by liking, but if ever men had reached for death with both hands they had. He tottered a step or two and knew his strength was coming back to him.

"Stir yourself, Albert Edward. We have to get water somehow."

His throat was dry. He felt his tongue beginning to swell. Water, water. Nothing could matter if they were only sure of water. Then his heart sank. He knew his own country. Any place less promising for water he had never seen. But he did not voice his opinion.

The cook rose deliberately. It was beneath his dignity to totter. He made sure of himself first, then placed one foot firmly before the other.

"I perambulate," he remarked with satisfaction. "I presume," he went on, "his honor will direct his footsteps to the north."

Doughty checked an impulse to laugh.

"And why the dickens should we go north?"

"I opine," said Albert Edward, "that in this sultry climate water is the great desideratum and I behold in the distance a jutting rock that presupposes a rivulet of the fluid element beyond it."

Doughty shaded his eyes. He could only see the long line where the ocean met the shore, a curiously straight line. Far in the distance the ridge that was on their right sloped a little toward the sea. Over it tumbled a mass of pig's face, portulacca, with its pointed fleshy green leaves and starry flowers, pink and mauve and yellow and red. It was the only break in the long line that stretched before and behind them. He could not see that it presupposed a river, this land did not look as if it were much given to rivers, but at any rate it was a point for which to make.

The world was open to them, he thought grimly. He watched his companion take off his shirt and bind it over his woolly head, and a nice savage he looked when his toilet was complete. They had nothing to carry, no impedimenta but the long cook's knife.

The cliff was much farther off than it looked. The tide was in and the going was heavy. There were numerous black and white wading birds that fled before them and thousands of tiny crabs bright blue and brilliant red but too small to be worth eating even if their thirst would have let them think of eating. Once Doughty climbed the ridge, the sand slipping and sliding beneath his feet. Inland he could see nothing but a long stretch of yellow grass. The going was worse than it was by the shore. He came back to the sea with a sigh.

Albert Edward's bronze shoulders were glistening in the sun. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes with the tail of his shirt.

"I deplore," said he, "the absence of the liquid element. I expire."

Arnold Doughty cursed, not loud but deep.

II

"LOOK here, Cheery," said Dave Sellar diving his hand into his breeches pocket, "at last!"

But Agatha considered her young brother reckless.

"Wait a minute," she looked round the shack prudently.

"Nonsense! Young thing what do you think of that! Shall we stop along here developing the country or shall we trip it to Melbourne and paint the town red, or show the English how to do it in London!"

He dumped on the rough bush-made table a wisp of rag which being unrolled showed three such gleaming iridescent pearls that even the girl, ignorant as she was, knew must be of supreme value.

Agatha and her two brothers, David and Jonathan, whose real name was Oliver, had come to Northwest Australia to where the little schooners with their Asiatic crews—the only Asiatics allowed in Australia—scour the sea for pearls for more than a thousand miles between Broome and King's Sound. It was rather against their will their sister had joined them. They maintained half heartedly it was no place for a woman. She declared, whole heartedly, she had as good a right to go pioneering as her brothers.

"Why," said she, "should Spanish fathers have land and not me who am a capable Australian?" For Spanish fathers have a mission for the blacks at Beagle Bay where they grow date palms and coconuts and have turned ten thousand acres of wilderness into a garden.

The argument had weight. Her father was modern. He treated her exactly as her brothers.

The brothers put their little all into a pearling schooner and took up land beside their sister's selection. They put up a shack and while they ran the schooner she attended to the farming with such help as they could give. At present her activities did not run beyond turkeys and chickens. The little township at the head of the inlet, Yallo-y-poora was a little over a couple of miles away.

There are always beginnings in Australia. It is one of its charms to the energetic. Agatha had been prepared for a lonely life and behold she found it amusing.

Her brothers were fond of her but a little inclined to patronize their "old" sister. True she was not yet twenty-four but David was fourteen months her junior and Jonathan only just twenty. She had been brought up with the idea her little brothers must be cared for and protected. They too had always thought of her as their big sister and the attitude makes for maturity. The men they met, the mixed crew, "duke's son, cook's son, son of a belted earl," found her pretty and attractive. David and Jonathan were only human. They began to be proud of being the happy possessors of a charming sister. They called her "young thing" laughingly and saw for the first time her beauty and her youth. Agatha blossomed in the genial atmosphere.

She was busy too and genuinely interested in her enterprise which was literally carving a home out of the wilderness. A great deal of time she was of necessity alone. The only servants to be had were black gins and to the average young Australian a black gin does not recommend herself. Cheery preferred to be alone. She had Buster, a nondescript terrier, for company. Of course her brothers came as often as they could and every man in the district had her under his special charge.

Of one thing she was quite sure, the unwisdom of proclaiming in a community like this the possession of potential wealth.

Now she looked down at the glimmering pearls her excited young brother was showing her and again looked round cautiously.

"Oh Dave! for goodness' sake, be careful!"

"Oh get out Cheery! Don't be a blooming ass!"

"But remember, Dave, there've been several robberies, and the thieves have never been found."

"And are not likely to be," said he. "Men are such fools and they are not fair to their crews. It's—"

Cheery hastily planked down the frying-pan on top of the pearls. Her brother looked up surprised. Then he laughed.

"Come on in, Weaver," he said. "We aren't afraid of you."

WEAVER was a neat man, tall and wiry with a venerable long white beard, remarkable by being more than middle-aged in a community where every one was young. He was a hawker, trading with his little blue cart up and down among the scanty settlers, selling books, pins, needles, paper, ink, such trifles that Cheery always wondered how he made it pay at all. He came to her now offering to buy eggs and chickens. He seemed a kindly old man with soft manners and had a great reputation for piety holding service on occasion if he happened to be at Yallo for Sunday. Once he had even been asked to read the burial service.

"I'm glad," said Cheery, "it's you." As she said it she wondered if she was. She thought her first impulse had been right. She would a deal rather he had not seen those pearls. But he had. He looked at them, she thought, gloatingly.

"Two," said he in his soft voice. "No, no, down dog, down."

Cheery picked up Buster who hated old Weaver.

"Two are perfect specimens. The other's a little irregular in shape but it's larger and ought to fetch a good price. Your sister," he turned to Sellar earnestly, "is quite right. If I were you I should get these to the bank pronto."

"Soon as possible," said Sellar. "Nobody knows but us and—"

"I shouldn't bank too much on only we three knowing," said Weaver with a tightening of his lips. "When a chap makes a big find it's apt to stick out all over him. I wouldn't leave them alone with my sister if I were you."

David shook his head laughing. "I sha'n't."

"Well, so long," said the hawker, "I must be getting along. Many a mickle makes a muckle and I'm not likely to handle even one pearl. Any chickens ready? I'll be back this way tomorrow."

"Not for two months yet. Give me time," said Cheery. "Stay and have a cup of tea," she added hospitably.

He delayed a moment while she got it and David held Buster who could not be persuaded to be hospitable.

When he had gone the brother and sister looked again at the pearls.

"I must get back," David said. "Had to come and show you our luck's changed at last. The weather's going to change too. You'd better come back with me and stop along with old Ma Murphy till it's good again."

"You'll be back tonight?"

"I will, please the Lord. If not Johnny'll be along."

"Then," said Cheery decidedly, "why should I leave my happy home for Ma Murphy's frowsy old pub?"

"I tell you, Cheery," said her brother looking round, "you haven't seen a real old man willy-willy yet. It's a snorter and old Ma Murphy—"

"Thank you," said Cheery with a little laugh. "You see I do know Ma Murphy and if there's a storm I want to take charge of my belongings. I've a couple of turkey hens sitting."

"Why bother about turkeys?" and he thoughtfully touched the pearls gleaming there in their nest of rags.

"It's just as well to look after the small profits," she said wisely. "Now what are you going to do with those pearls?"

"Back into my belt."

"I think not," said she. "You told old Weaver you wouldn't leave them alone with me so I shan't be suspected. Naturally he'll think you are carrying them—"

"Are you gone dotty, young thing? I'd trust old Weaver with—"

"The wisdom of years will out. He's the licensed gossip of the districts. What would his visits be worth if he hadn't something to tell—all in strict secrecy. And remember they are not being left with me. Therefore no one will look for them with me. And if they stick you up you can let them go through you with a quiet mind."

"I think I see any one going through me while I'm right side up!"

"You're a hefty young man, thanks to my judicious up-bringing," she laughed. "But even hefty young men are taken unawares. Better leave the pearls behind." She looked round the room. On a rough little shelf fixed against the slab wall was a little green tin marked in big letters "Tea." She took it up. "Here, put them in the tea caddy—put them in loose among the tea."

He protested that it would take such a deuce of a time to find them again but she still laughed and said that was an advantage not to be overlooked.

"You might never strike pearls like that again if you fish for the rest of your life."

Grumbling he dropped them in and shook them up among the tea. Then he mounted the horse he had hitched to the rope that went over the roof of the shack holding it by stakes on either side and with a gay, "So long" went away down the path that was lost to sight among tall yellow grass over his horse's withers.

IT WAS a weird place in which the girl was left alone. Far as the eye could see was the tall yellow waving grass, tall as Agatha herself. They had cleared about an acre of it for the shack where the creek widened to a good-sized water-hole. They had hesitated about leaving her alone even in the day-time but she had put her foot down. She had come to settle and she wasn't helpless.

"I'm a working woman," she said, "and I couldn't do with you boys knocking round idle. I've got Buster for company." Buster was a nondescript terrier who adored her and told her so twenty times a day.

"And you've got the old stock horse," said Jonathan, "and old Ma Murphy's not far off if the loneliness gets you."

Till the pearls came the loneliness had never even threatened to get her. But now once she and Buster were left in charge the little clearing presented a very different aspect. If it hadn't been for Buster—whatever should she have done without Buster!

Cheery began to feel the burden of wealth. Suppose some one came seeking those pearls! They were worth—thousands she supposed. And what exactly did thousands mean?

"We can think in terms of turkeys, Buster, can't we? But we really don't understand pearls."

Unluckily she found pearls had a tendency to make turkeys seem of no account. She stamped her foot determinedly. The poultry and the selection was her job. She must not neglect them. Where was all her pride in opening up the country? Gone because three little "stones" that looked like beads gleamed iridescent? Nonsense. She would go and look up the sitting turkeys. It was a little early but she was determined to convince herself of her own interest in her selection and to forget if possible those pearls. Luckily she had not to go far. She could keep her eyes on the shack all the time. Again she pulled herself up. There it was. Now she could think of nothing but the pearls. She began to understand the difficulties of "the young man who had great possessions." How shall a rich man enter the kingdom of Heaven? It could not matter much whether those turkeys hatched out or not. Only this morning it had been vital!

Buster, too, seemed to be finding something wrong with the situation. The pearls couldn't be affecting him! Yet he was manifestly uneasy. Or was it her fancy? She took herself to task. How ridiculous to be afraid. Surely she could stick things for a few hours—even for a night if it were necessary.

Dave had said it was going to change. It was. That was what was the matter. The ethereal sky became lowering and threatening. There was a heavy feeling in the air that caught Cheery by the throat. She noticed that even the fowls and turkeys instead of seeing their food, as was their comfortable wont, hung round on the edge of the clearing like things afraid of some unexplainable evil. It comforted Cheery. They certainly couldn't know about the pearls.

She washed up her dishes; tidied her little house, not that there was much to tidy; made all neat about the little camp; spoke cheerfully to Buster and tried to feel hopeful.

But all the difficulties and possible dangers of her position rose up and confronted her. The fear that had risen in her mind the moment she set eyes on the pearls had her in its grip at last. She felt it in the long hush, in the awful stillness. The old stock horse, her link with the outside world, drooped his head as if he were too miserable and depressed for words and little Buster, the very embodiment of courage, came close against her, looking round eagerly and angrily as she went along the edge of the grass to inspect her sitting turkeys.

One was not there. There lay the speckled eggs and the mother was gone.

For a moment the catastrophe was stimulating. But only for a moment. Possibly she would return and if she didn't would it very much matter? She ought to work in the beginnings of their garden. But she gave it up as soon almost as she touched the spade and sat down under the canvas fly that served as a veranda. Would they stay here if those pearls—

BUSTER ran to the edge of the grass; barked and sniffed angrily and came back again looking up in her face, whining as if he could call her attention to the fact that some danger threatened and she was making no preparation to guard against it.

But what was she to do? Give up and take the pearls to Ma Murphy's pub? Give in before Dave had been gone an hour? He and Johnny had objected to being hampered with a sister. Was she to prove them right? No, she couldn't do that. Besides, she didn't know that she would be any happier at Ma Murphy's. She would certainly not be so comfortable. She must stick it.

She remembered in her childhood the wakeful nights she had spent when she had been afraid of werwolves, vampires, ghosts and cattle of that ilk. She had always waked up in the morning quite safe and afraid even to tell of her terrors. She had even known herself to comfort David and Jonathan during those trying nights of long ago. So now she smiled with one side of her mind though fear had her in his grip.

This stillness was ominous. The brazen sky had lost its beauty. This sweltering sun that poured down into the little clearing threatened. Buster snuggled his tousley head under her arm and she welcomed the pressure of his lithe little body, in spite of the torrid temperature. But he would not stay. He began sniffing round the place again; listening; looking at her; barking a little; listening again; plainly as words he was saying there was something about the place he did not like?

But she could see nothing.

The fowls were crouched close together under the shade of the tree where they roosted and the turkeys—she thought again of her lost turkey. She really couldn't afford to lose a precious turkey hen. She rose up and scattered some grain. The fowls took not the slightest notice but the turkeys responded languidly and one came from her nest and began snatching grain as if she were filling up against time. But the lost one never appeared.

Cheery felt she daren't go and look for her though that was what Buster was apparently inviting her to do. There was something so threatening in the whole atmosphere that she daren't move away from the shelter of familiar things, the hut and the table and the bed.

But were they familiar? It was growing dark and it was not four o'clock in the afternoon. Why wouldn't Buster keep quiet. She'd lost her turkey hen.

She kept saying it over and over as if it were some defensive formula. How could she be afraid when she was troubled because she had lost her turkey? And then the formula showed her its intrinsic hollowness. She didn't care if all the turkeys and fowls too were lost. She would give the whole stock just to see one of her brothers come riding through the long grass home.

How oppressive it was. Worse how still. The old horse moved and it seemed as if the sound echoed and reechoed. Just the rustling of grass but it fell in a dead stillness. Buster changed his tone and gave a little frightened whine.

"Oh don't, Buster, don't." Her voice was like a shout in the threatening silence. She found herself talking in whispers.

"Buster, Buster, old man, what is it?"

BUSTER couldn't tell her. He did make it plain that he was uneasy. The horse came toward her as if he too wanted companionship and comfort and—the sound of his trampling hoofs emphasized it—she was here alone in the wilderness. Something awful was going to happen. All nature was waiting—waiting afraid.

"Buster, Buster." She pressed him against her, whispering, afraid lest her voice should break the awful stillness and the sound of it remind her how far she was from human aid.

There came a sigh, a long-drawn shuddering sigh as if the earth moved and was sick with trepidation. Cheery clutched the little yellow dog so hard he whimpered a remonstrance.

There was a very slight movement in the bending ears of grass above her head, just the faintest trembling, and it was growing darker. There were no clouds; it was as if the sun were being withdrawn from the earth and all the color was fading from the sky. The fowls and the turkeys began to make restless uneasy movements. Cheery, terrified beyond measure kept her arms round Buster who responded to her caresses uneasily, licking her hand and looking up as if to say there was other business he ought to be attending to. If it hadn't been for the little dog she felt she would have gone distracted. Never had she been so afraid for never had she been so cut off from her kind before and this that was happening was not understandable.

Then something happened that was understandable, but instead of being comforted she felt she was wakening from some imaginary terror to something real and tangible that was still more terrifying.

Buster began to bark furiously, angrily. He sprang from her arms and with his white fangs showing darted round the little house.

She followed.

For a moment her terror lifted: then swept down upon her trebly strong.

THERE stood old Weaver, his straw hat pushed back from his head, a stout knobbed stick in his hand with which he was aiming angry blows at the dog who eluded him. She did not like the look on his face. But after all, she told herself, no man likes to be attacked by a dog that should be friendly. Buster had never liked old Weaver. Now he was openly hostile.

"Buster! Buster!" remonstrated Cheery half heartedly and Buster recognized the doubt in her tones. "Oh, Mr. Weaver, I didn't hear you coming."

Buster took up a position at his mistress's feet. As old Weaver came toward her he burst out angrily and threateningly again.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But sit down there on that chair a little way away. I can't keep Buster quiet if you don't. The storm seems to be upsetting him. Quiet, Buster, quiet, good dog. He's not coming near me. There! There! I'll bring another chair. I thought you were miles away by now," she said as she planted the chair against the wall some distance away from her visitor.

The hawker said civilly, still keeping a watchful and an angry eye on Buster, who more than returned the compliment, that feeling she would be so alone with an old man willy-willy coming up he had been moved to come and offer his company.

She wondered why he had gone behind the house but she did not say so.

"It was very good of you," she said, and even as she said it she felt it was not true. This was an evil old man. She did not know what to say to him. She was afraid of him. What was his object in coming here? The pearls, of course. But he would think the pearls were with Dave. And what was she to do? Even flight was now out of the question.

"But where is your cart?" she asked as casually as she could.

"Left it along there in shelter," he said. "No good messing round with a cart with a willy-willy on the way."

"I've lost my turkey hen," she said wildly. Not that she cared or thought that he would care, but she did not want to show that she was afraid. What could she say to this man who now seemed tongue-tied and who was wont to chatter so freely about nothing at all—the licensed gossip of the district she had called him.

"What you done with them pearls?" he asked.

"My brother took them," she lied and her heart sank.

A low moaning grew and grew and the darkness, a gritty darkness, deepened. Darker. And darker. The man sitting there clutching his knobby stick seemed to loom up threatening. There was a heavy earthy smell. She could only see the old horse like a dim shadow. A puff of air and the earthy smell and the grit were accounted for.

A light dust was falling.

"It's coming," said old Weaver. "We sartinly oughter see that them guy ropes is fast."

THE ropes went across the little house and were fastened to stakes on either side, having been put there for exactly such a contingency as this, were fast. There was no need for old Weaver to worry about them. But that might be courtesy on his part. Buster didn't think so. He growled threateningly when the man moved. She thought the man looked at her queerly.

She didn't want him in the house. Those pearls were there. She was so conscious of the fact that she felt she must in some mysterious way be conveying it to him. Perhaps she was.

More dust. It hung between her and her unwelcome visitor like a veil in the growing darkness. He was keeping a wary eye on the little dog.

"I don't see we can do anything," she said desperately. "We're safer outside.

Anyhow there's nothing of much value if it all goes."

Even in the deepening darkness she caught the queer glance he shot her. It was as if he were weighing things up and making a decision. Afterward she made up her mind he had decided that the pearls were hidden on her person. He rose to his feet to come toward her and Buster was on him like a shot. He let out a volley of oaths and Buster replied with still more threatening growls. Weaver was forced to jump round to avoid him. He let out with his knobbed stick.

A stronger puff. More dust.

"Buster!" cried Cheery and the tempest was upon them with a howl, a thick stifling suffocating tempest; a roar and the wind was under the fly straining the ropes that held it to breaking point. Still in the whirling brown fog she saw Buster attacking her visitor and agilely keeping out of the way of the waddy he wielded with difficulty for the wind was strengthening.

After all this was inhospitality in the extreme degree.

"Buster! Buster!" cried Cheery. "Oh, Mr. Weaver, keep still a moment and I'll catch him."

Was it the thickening dust that gave such a sinister expression to the face she had thought so mild and somewhat vacant?

THE fierce wind that was like a breath from an oven tore at the canvas, the rope snapped and up it went. Cheery had a last vision of the man coming toward her and thrusting at the determined little dog; the canvas rising into the thick whirling air followed by something that she guessed must be a sheet of bark from the roof. The darkness swept down upon her, a darkness almost blinding though it was only midafternoon.

The man was now coming toward her and she began to fear him most terribly. She stepped back. With a shriek the wind flicked a rope in her face. She stumbled. The next moment her visitor had his arms round her. They were like bars of iron. She had never dreamed this old man had such strength. Their grasp was not to aid. She was a prisoner and she fought furiously. She could hear good little Buster growling and snapping in an effort to help her but she was conscious that he was only delaying the inevitable end.

III

ALBERT EDWARD'S prediction was correct. When they reached the little headland he shouted with delight. Through a long stretch of sand a river, full to the brim, its waters gleaming in the sunlight like molten copper, wound along till it spread over the sandy bar that choked its mouth. Both men raced for it and the black one flung himself down and plunged his face in the inviting water.

More deliberately for the clumps of mangrove here and there was not calculated to inspire confidence, Doughty was going down on his knees when his companion raised his face with a howl of dismay.

"Nauseous!" he spluttered. "Unpalatable! Detestable! Salacious!" he spat vigorously.

"Salt," said Doughty with a sigh. "I was afraid so. Probably it's better farther up." He glanced at the threatening sky and taking off his boots began wading up the shallow stream. There were fish in plenty there, big fish, he saw them. But they didn't interest him with this burning thirst in his throat. Water they must have.

The only hope was to keep going up the stream. Albert Edward following groaned and bemoaned himself openly. In the longest words that Doughty had ever heard strung together the negro cook expressed his opinion that they were bound into an unknown desert where death, or probably something worse, awaited them. Dying of thirst was the least evil that he predicted.

The creek wound its way behind a sand hill bound together with gorgeous pig's face and soft gray weeds of the shore. Presently the water was flowing between banks on which grew tender green grasses. He stooped then, tasted, and drank deep—drank nectar. A moment or two later both men were laying on their backs, refreshed and relaxed, staring up into the dark lowering sky above them.

There was not a breath of wind and it was suffocatingly hot. Doughty wondered uneasily what was to be his next move. He was ravenously hungry. His thoughts turned with a distinct interest to the big fish he had passed by lower down the stream. There might be fish here but he could not see them. In fact he couldn't see much here at all but tall grass that hemmed them in on every side. The sea and the mangrove had disappeared. The river was cutting its way through grass, short and green and tender by the banks where had evidently been mud flats left by shrinking water, beyond tall and sere, matching he thought, the sky above. There was no sign of life. He couldn't see any fish now and unfortunately man must eat. Albert Edward raised himself dejectedly on one elbow and looked hopelessly round him. Then he stiffened to attention and looked intently at the place where the creek seemed to disappear into the tall yellow grass. There was a stump of a dead tree there and he pointed to it with a finger that shook with excitement.

"I opine," said he, "that before us lies the highway."

"A road! Great Scott!" Doughty scrambled to his feet and made his way to the tree stump. Surely enough there were marks, faint tracks, a wheeled vehicle might have passed that way in past ages. If it had passed once it might surely pass again. He looked at the tree stump that had first attracted their attention. One side had evidetly been smoothed with an ax or a knife at some no distant date and there were marks upon it as if it had been written upon with a pencil. But the sun and the weather had blurred and obliterated the writing. Still it was a sign of humanity, civilized humanity.

Nevertheless Doughty sighed. Australia, particularly Northwestern Australia was a big and lonely place. It was something to find a road but he surmised a passer-by once a month would constitute a crowd.

Still a wheeled vehicle!

"Come on, Albert Edward!"

BUT Albert Edward demurred. At the prospect of coming into touch with their fellow man again something of the tenseness left the situation.

"We had not," said he thoughtfully, "partaken of nourishment for some considerable period even before the outbreak of abrupt turbulence which set us ashore. There is an aching void in my interior. Unless it be disseminated soon I fear a speedy end to my presence upon this orb."

"Same here, Albert Edward, but not quite as bad as that. We ought to be able to hold out till we hit a station."

But he spoke doubtfully. In a land where people thought nothing of riding eighty or a hundred miles to pick their mail out of a box stuck on top of a post, a stump that had been written upon hardly gave guarantee of any one within a couple of hundred miles. It would be easy enough to miss them.

The late cook of the *Sea Spray* was a man of resource. He looked up at the sky and over the land and back the way they had come.

"That inner craving," he announced solemnly, "draws me to the finny denizens of the outer reaches."

"Back we go," said Doughty and marched down the river again. His thirst and hunger appeased he would be the better able to face the situation.

As the water shallowed toward the bar the little bright blue and red crabs made their appearance again, first one or two, then hundreds, then apparently thousands of them.

"Those crustaceans," meditated the cook, "are small and I opine contain little but salt water, but possibly in the absence of any provender more substantial—"

"I'm not quite equal to eating them raw," said Doughty "—yet."

"Being advanced in civilization," said the cook with dignity, "we have the means of ignition. The luminary on high—"

"By Jove," said Doughty, "I forgot that. We'd better make haste then," and he glanced at the sun. "It'll be gone presently. Your watch glass all right? Get a fire alight for God's sake. There's a bit of driftwood there and plenty of dry grass. I'd rather have the crabs as sauce if we can only catch the fish."

"I am almost prepared to sacrifice one of my digital extremities," said Albert Edward smacking his lips, "but possibly this," and he proceeded to cut off a shining brass button from his trousers, "I apprehend that in these remote parts—" the twine that held it was tough.

"Get the fire Albert Edward and don't fire the grass. Here give me that knife. I suppose I'll have to offer up my sock."

By the time Doughty had got a stout line and flung the button into the stream, Albert Edward using his watch glass as a burning glass had a fire alight and was keeping it going with bits of driftwood that spit and crackled and burned blue with salt. The creek was full of fish. Doughty lost one almost immediately and the language he used in his disgust brought the cook to his side.

"I apprehend," said that gentleman, "that a little aid in landing with my raiment—"

Another misguided fish was on the bottom. Without a word like an eel Albert Edward slipped into the stream, got his shirt under it and two seconds later was panting on the bank on top of a ten-pound fish that had his nose entangled somehow in the armhole of the shirt.

"He has spiny excrescences," he panted, "and they penetrate."

"Get up, you ass," but Doughty by no means thought him an ass and Albert Edward knew it, "and I'll finish him with the knife."

THAT fish was succulent. The two of them ate slice after slice grilled on their aromatic little fire. Doughty had satisfied his hunger before he began to think that it was tasteless and insipid.

About the same time Albert Edward came to the same conclusion.

"Vapid," said he wiping his mouth.

"Get out," said Doughty serenely, "be thankful. We can always come back here to food and water. We mayn't get anything better for a month. Now we'll go up the river again and explore."

"I prognosticate," said Albert Edward as they waded up-stream again, "a portentous convulsion of nature. It will be intensely unacceptable to meet it in this wilderness of withered herbage."

"I guess we'll survive," said the white man philosophically. He was feeling more at peace with the world.

But when he reached the stump he got a shock. On the flattened side where he had thought he had seen erased inscriptions was scrawled in black pencil.

Look out! Blacks bad!

He gasped. Here was a pleasant predicament. But where was the writer of the message? And whom was it intended for?

Albert Edward took in the situation at the same moment.

"I am aghastedly amazed," said he drawing a long breath and looking round the horizon.

There was absolutely nothing in sight. Except for that pencil scrawl the place was exactly as they had left it a bare hour ago. Yet somebody must have been here, some one who expected some one else to pass.

"Now we have struck it," said Doughty.

They were very weary; they had one long knife between them and for all they knew that long yellow grass might be full of those blacks that the sign post described as "bad."

The blacks in North Australia are a difficult proposition. Doughty knew they could easily wipe out a couple of unarmed men. Probably the man who had written that message was legging it as hard as he could away from the danger point. For this was a most unpleasant place in which to be attacked. Out of that grass spears might so easily come hurtling.

HE LOOKED round him hesitating. Always as they looked the creek seemed to disappear into the tall grass. It had seemed to close in by this stump but once beside it they saw they might go on a little farther before the water reached the long grass. Albert Edward looked ahead thoughtfully. He stretched out his hand for the knife which Doughty held and spoke softly like a man who fears to be heard. Doughty began to feel strongly that the knife would be a more effective weapon in his hands. He felt himself the more efficient. He was also horribly conscious that the knife, sharp as it was, was but a poor weapon against hidden men with spears.

"What is it?" he breathed.

"I opine," said the cook sententiously, "they are lying concealed in the grass there."

"Heaven help us if they are!" Splendid targets the two of them must make standing on the bank. "Where? Where?"

The cook half raised his hand and dropped it again as if he feared to notify the hidden enemy he had discovered their presence. He dropped down and lay close against the earth where it sloped a little toward the water thus presenting as small a portion of his person as possible to the hidden enemy.

"But I cannot see a sign of any one."

"If your honor will glance along the rampart of herbage," mouthed the cook verbose even in this quandary, "he will see that the regularity of the sylvan wall has been recently deranged and replaced somewhat cursorily."

The weight at Doughty's heart began to lift. He did not believe that any blacks would crush down the grass and then so replace it that any passer-by could see what had been done. He looked along the tall grass. Certainly the cook was right, it had been disturbed. Would it be wisdom to pass along quickly without paying any attention or would it be better to go and see what threatened? But even while he debated he knew what the answer must be. He could not pass on and leave that place without investigating.

He half rose.

"I beg of your honor," said the cook, "a discreet valor—"

"Oh hang," said Doughty because he was afraid. He rose up and walked boldly toward the long grass. Perhaps he was doing a mad thing and there was a distinctly creepy feeling about his spine. But he had the knife and he wondered if it was not playing rather low down on Albert Edward. Albert Edward was following him. Good man!

He thrust the knife back to him.

"Here, take it," he said and marched on the more boldly with empty hands.

Again he was surprised. Coming all along the soft mud flat, the narrow strip, very narrow here between the water and the tall dry grass were distinct hoof prints. Some one had ridden along the soft damp earth. Just opposite the place where the grass had been disturbed the ground was regularly ploughed up. But there they stopped. Had the solitary rider been attacked and killed here? It looked horribly like it. Doughty felt his hands and feet, in spite of the temperature, cold; he could hear Albert Edward's long drawn breaths behind him and deduced the emotion must be strong that held him silent. He went on because there was nothing else for it. He must unravel this mystery now. It would be impossible to go up the creek with this menace behind them, cutting them off too from their known food supply. What was going to be done must be done quickly. He stepped forward and thrust aside the long stems of the grass.

Certainly some one had been there. The long grass inside was all pulled down and piled up in a heap.

"I opine," said Albert Edward, "the enemy has retreated before the superior force."

"Don't you buck yourself up with the idea we're the superior force," said Doughty. "They know a thing or two likely to make us sit up. If they are blacks," he added, because, though he didn't know much about blacks this was by no means a well concealed hiding place. He could have done better himself. Of course, and it was an uncomfortable thought, all this might be done just to lure on unsuspecting and ignorant people like Albert Edward and himself.

ALL the tall grass inside here had been thrown together. The great stout stems in some places had been cut and lay making a large rough heap. There was a curious smell.

The cook sniffed.

"Blood," said he terse for once in his life and he looked as if he was prepared to bolt.

Blood! Of course it was blood! Doughty laid a hand on his arm. He stooped and with the long knife using it as a lever he lifted up a pile of interlaced grass. Doughty repressed a shout. He disclosed a horse's head with its throat cut. No wonder he had smelt blood. The ground underneath was soaked with it.

"An equine body still calorific," meditated Albert Edward in a low tone, "presupposes the equestrian at no great distance."

"Good God!" cried Doughty touching the horse's neck, "so it is! Why it's only just been done. Let's clear off the grass Albert Edward."

His thoughts as he dragged off the grass dwelt on that warning. But he thought blacks would have used a spear and clearly this horse's throat had been cut.

The sight seemed to have calmed somehow Albert Edward's fears. With the knife he went levering up the grass till a saddled horse came into view and underneath it but saved in a measure from crushing by the contour of the ground and the springy grass was a man.

"Ha! The equestrian! And he has shuffled off this mortal coil."

"He couldn't have cut his horse's throat afterward," said Doughty, helping Albert Edward to get the man from under the horse. He was a young fellow and had been lying on his back. The blood that had so freely soaked into the ground had not reached him but his face and shirt were all covered with the dust that had come out of the grass that was over him.

"God Almighty!" he said, "he's dead," though he had expected nothing else.

Albert Edward bent over him and lifted up the eyelids gently enough.

“I opine,” said he, “that the vital spark still lingers.”

IV

DOUGHTY came to the same conclusion. The young man had evidently been hit on the head. His hair was stuck together with blood but he still breathed. Possibly he was only stunned.

This seemed an unpleasant place in which to linger.

As quickly as they could they lifted him out of the grass and bore him to the water. There they bathed his face and washed the blood out of his hair. Certainly he had had a bad blow.

At first Doughty had done the thing hastily, looking round every moment and exhorting Albert Edward to keep his eyes skinned. But as he worked he began to come to the conclusion that whether the blacks were bad or not they had had no hand in this business. Albert Edward put it clearly.

“I opine,” said he, “that this is the work of some miscreant who is a product of civilization,” and he pointed to the breeches and shirt pockets turned inside out, the belt unloosened and the flapped pockets in it unfastened.

“Pleasant place,” groaned Doughty. What was he to do with this young fellow? Clearly they could not carry him, yet to leave him unless they could raise help was to leave him to die. Could he have written the message? Albert Edward was apparently asking himself the same question.

“I opine,” said he aloud, “to slay that horse and wound his rider and to endeavor to conceal all traces of criminality would require a longer time than that which has elapsed between our arrival and departure.”

“No. I think not. It was a thing done quickly, I believe,” said Doughty with a flash of insight, “he's coming back to fire the place. There was a little heap of inflammable stuff arranged in the corner.”

“I took cognizance of it even in our cursory examination,” said Albert Edward gently washing the wound in the insensible man's head with a bunch of soft leaves. “I conclude this foliage is less likely to contain deleterious bacilli than any of our raiment.”

“A good looking young chap too,” said Doughty. “What the devil are we to do now?”

And truly he was puzzled.

“If we abandon him in the grass and the recreant returns and kindles that little pile he will certainly be incinerated.”

“If he does that,” said Doughty looking round uncomfortably, “it strikes me that we'll all share the same fate. But he must be up-stream. He's certainly not gone down and what would be the object of hiding in the grass?”

But for that matter what was the object of killing a horse and knocking his rider on the head?

The situation grew more and more uncomfortable which every way he looked at it. He had been afraid this place had been uninhabited. Now he began to fear the inhabitants.

Overhead the sky looked stronger than ever. There was a curious moaning in the air.

“We'll have to risk it,” he said coming to a decision. “We'll leave him by the water, Albert Edward. We'll make a rough shelter for his head with grass stems and then we'll go on and see what we can find. He must have come from somewhere.”

Albert Edward began cutting the tough grass with his knife; Doughty found half a dozen pieces of driftwood and roughly tying the grass together to make a little thatch they arranged it to shade the insensible man.

“It's the best we can do for him,” said Doughty in troubled tones. Come on Albert Edward. If we don't strike any one in an hour we'll come back though the Lord knows what we're to do then.”

ALBERT EDWARD kept glancing up anxiously at the sky. The sun was veiled now and faint puffs of wind were shaking the tops of the grass. There was a rustling and a swishing that sounded eerie in the growing darkness. The belt of fertile mud along the bank was growing rapidly narrower. Albert Edward's eyes were the keener of the two and just as the dense grass came right down to the water's edge he gave a whoop of delight that might have been heard, thought Doughty, by every savage between them and Perth. He began a remonstrance when he too saw the reason.

There hitched half in the grass was a gray horse and a small tilted cart. The sort of cart—he knew it well enough—that hawkers in Australia use to visit the outlying settlers. Almost he felt his troubles vanishing, for a cart like this meant that the country was beginning to be opened up. They might count on a settler within a reasonable distance. But what a place in which to leave the poor beast. At least the owner might have taken it out and allowed it to graze. He was a merciful man was Doughty. The horse had evidently struggled to get away but the wheels were locked and the earth banked up in such fashion that he could not stir.

"Alfred Weaver, Derby," was painted on the side of the cart. In the cart was a scanty supply of haberdashery, needles and cottons and on the floor was a bundle clearly the owner's blankets and spare clothes.

"It is borne in on me," said Albert Edward, his sympathies perhaps sharpened by his recent suffering, "that unfortunate quadruped is agonized with thirst."

"We'll take the liberty of unhitching him. Anyhow we'll commandeer the cart to carry the sick man. Here's a coil of rope. Take the bit out of his mouth and let him have a drink and a feed while we look round. If that grass is fired," he went on uneasily, "the poor beast won't have much chance for his life. But then, good Lord, neither will we."

Was this the man who had written the message? But why leave the cart fast in a dangerous place? Doughty decided he'd explore a little further while the horse was baited. That the poor beast was thirsty there was no doubt. He made for the water as eagerly as the two men who had found him had done so short a while ago.

They went up the creek a little. It was the only way they could move and they expected to come on the owner of the cart at any moment. It was very dark indeed now, so dark that all the tall grass stalks lost their individuality and were massed together like a wall. Behind him Doughty could see the horse and cart a faint blur against it. The creek ran on ahead, molten no longer but darkly reflecting the dark sky overhead. The moaning in the air grew and grew and he was aware that a fierce wind was blowing overhead from which they were protected by the tall close growing grass. On them was falling a fine dust.

"Now is this a "cock-eyed bob" or a "willy willy?" he asked aloud.

Albert Edward preferred to call it a convulsion of nature. Then came vivid lightning cutting through a brown fog of dust like a knife. It lighted up a long lane of water, the tall wall of grass growing on either hand and by it as through a thick brown mist he saw a turkey fluttering across the water. When the sound of thunder that rolled and reverberated above them died away he heard the cook's voice fervently thanking his Maker aloud in that He had seen fit to bring them "into the purlieus of civilization" again.

"But I don't see it, Albert Edward?"

"You have not refreshed your eyes with that domestic bird! It is a fine female turkey hen! A female turkey hen presupposes a farm and—"

"Good Lord! I hope she does!"

"If we follow—I implore you sah—I implore you. Here is an interval in the grass. The wanderer is making her way homeward. Softly—softly—she is leading us—"

WHAT was the turkey's intention in Albert Edward's opinion he could not hear, for there came another vivid flash of forked lightning and his words were drowned in the crash of thunder that followed.

But the lightning showed him going away to the left a clearly defined track, a track that most certainly had been made by civilized man. The creek widened into a big shallow water-hole; the dense growing grass opened and on the left was a narrower track. Doughty was for following the wider trail seeing what desperate need there was for haste but the turkey hen fluttering across the water entered the grass by way of the narrower track.

Albert Edward laid an earnest pleading hand on Doughty's arm.

"She seeks the shelter of her household haunts. I pray you, sah—"

It was against Doughty's better reasoning. He knew well enough that settler's shack was likely as not to be empty at this time of day, even if the settler were provident enough to possess a turkey. Besides how did he know how far off it might be? Or the turkey might be simply on her way to her nest. Common sense demanded they should stick to the broader trail. But the cook was so earnest that he disregarded common sense and decided—though the injured man behind there seemed to be reproaching him—to give ten minutes to a glance behind the wall of grass.

They followed the turkey. Then they forgot her.

They arrived exactly at the crucial moment. Cheery was at her wits' end. The wind was roaring overhead. She could only hear that and Buster's furious barking.

Through the veil of dust Doughty's eye was caught by a bright patch of color, a woman's rose-pink linen dress against the slab walls of a hut; a tall man had got her arms behind her; she was fighting for freedom; a small dog was backing her to the best of his ability by attacking the man's legs. Already one trouser leg was in a fringe. It was the dog's onslaught that evidently delayed the end; but it could not have been long delayed. A moment and they would have been too late. The man was ruthless. Doughty never doubted for a moment that he meant to kill. As he ran he took in the long scene; the newly turned earth of the garden; a long strip of canvas held against the tall grass by the furious wind; a spade stuck in the earth. Albert Edward was flourishing the knife; Doughty grabbed the spade as he passed.

Both the man and woman had their back to them and neither saw nor heard till Doughty bringing down the spade on the man's shoulder, gripped his cruel arms and the brawny black cook got the knife at his throat.

Then the blinding darkness swept down upon them engulfing everything. In it he heard the cook's triumphant voice, above the curses, voluble and foul, of their captive.

"It am indesinently true dat a female turkey hen is certain sure—"

He paused for the securing of their prisoner took all their energies.

"Rope? I saw some a moment ago," gasped Doughty in the darkness.

An end was thrust into his hand for shaken as she was Cheery had all her wits about her. A couple of minutes later as the gritty fog thinned a little enough to let them see what they were doing Doughty found himself standing over a prostrate man threatening to gag him if he did not curb his foul tongue; the cook knelt triumphant beside him and the girl in rose pink was smoothing down her dishevelled dress.

"Left to himself he am shackled for all time," said Albert Edward's confident voice. "I predicate a female turkey hen—"

A vivid flash of lightning again cut him short. Doughty saw a pretty girl with dark hair and soft gray eyes which still had in them a measure of terror for all her capable promptness. She was pressed back against the slab wall and he rightly judged she was debating whether she should not take advantage of her freedom to make her escape.

With the thunder came the darkness again. The heavens opened and down came the rain with a deafening roar; rain that stilled the wind; rain in sheets; rain like a wall shutting them in on every side. He stretched out his hands and caught the girl by the shoulders. Firm and softly rounded they were. She shrank away as well she might.

"Don't be afraid," he said quickly. "It's all right. I don't understand in the least but I'm sure we can straighten things out."

The lightning came again and he saw the gallant cook down on his knees, in one hand the spade, in the other held by the blade the long knife.

"I am indutiably certain sure," said he, "that I speak for his honor when I render madam our weapons of offense and defense."

CHEERY giggled in spite of herself. The laugh ended in a sob and she pulled herself together. Doughty saw that the glimpse she had of his face seemed to give her confidence though he was horribly conscious he was an unshaven ruffian in a very ragged shirt. Buster was snuffling thoughtfully at his boots, weighing him up and evidently approving of him.

"Good dog! Good dog!" he said. "My God! If it hadn't been for the dog!"

Cheery sobbed a little then, sobs of relief. It lightened. The dust was beaten down. It was in their hair and on their faces in trails of mud.

Then came explanations.

"I was bound for Yallo-y-poora," finished Doughty.

"But this is Yallo-y-poora," said Cheery. "At least the post-office and the pub and blacksmith's shop are round at the head of the inlet about a couple of miles away."

"Great Scott!"

"Are the blacks bad about here?" he added.

"No," she said. "We've never been in the least afraid. There aren't very many."

He told her of the finding of the hawker's cart.

"His," she said indicating the man on the ground. "I've seen it often. I've wondered how on earth he made it pay. The population is so scanty. I've often been sorry for him and always made him stay and have a meal."

"I opine," said Albert Edward rocking himself on his heels, "Madam misapplied her commiseration," and stooping forward he thrust his hand inside the captive's shirt and drew from his waist amid a torrent of blasphemy a stout leather belt with little pouches of chamois leather attached. He dropped the belt beside him and calmly turned old Weaver on his face rubbing his nose in the mud till his curses ended in stifled gurgles. Then he turned him back again and wiped his face with his own shirt.

"An indoctrination in deportment," he remarked, "which can be repeated if necessary."

It was not necessary.

Old Weaver glared at him as he opened the little pouches and displayed not only two or three rolls of bank notes but quite a number of pearls; but he was silent while the other two exclaimed.

"Good gracious!" cried Cheery. "There have been complaints of pearls missing, but so many—I never thought—"

"Undoubtedly," said Albert Edward taking the floor, "there is always a leakage where precious gems are searched for by the inferior races. This miscreant is a receiver."

"It's all very well Albert Edward but we are forgetting that sick man. We must go back for him."

"But who—" asked Cheery and when they explained she was wild with anxiety. It must be Dave she thought.

They put the belt into Cheery's rough little cupboard, sent Albert Edward to Yallo-y-poora for help and left Buster on guard over old Weaver and she and Doughty went back along the track.

Doughty's heart sank for he feared what they would find.

It was Dave. He was sitting up nursing his head and looked at them in a dazed fashion but to Doughty's relief he was very far from dead and certainly did not look as if he were likely to die.

"Cheery," he said, "what the blazes are you doing here? Snakes! I never took a toss of old Bluebird!"

He looked round.

"Old Weaver found something in the grass there. He called me. Where is old Weaver?"

Cheery sat down then and began to cry softly.

"It's all right," she sobbed. "No, of course I'm not going to cry. But I'm so thankful it's all right."

AFTERWARD in the shack they pieced things together. Albert Edward had fetched most of the population of the little township. The blacksmith and postmaster who had some skill as a bush physician, the skippers of three pearling schooners, the landlord of the pub and Oliver Sellar.

David Sellar remembered Weaver waiting for him and calling to him to come and look at something in the grass. He remembered dismounting but he remembered no more. Putting things together they decided he must have been knocked on the head, his horse dragged in and his throat cut.

"And if you'd a had any valuables on you," said the blacksmith, "the place 'ud have been fired and everything 'ud have gone up in smoke. You chaps made a find?"

The three Sellars looked at one another.

"I see," said the blacksmith with a little laugh, "he come back for 'em. Intended to fire the place on his way back. I guess," said he, looking at Doughty, "your nice cultivated skipper of the *Sea Spray* was in league with him. I remember him round here three months ago and I thought his story was pretty thin. It wouldn't have washed again."

"He never intended to come back, never no more," declared the landlord of the Pearler's Arms, "not he. No more did the old hawker. He'd left his cart so we'd all go into mourning for him. No mistaking it. The only cart in the district."

"What I don't understand," said David Sellar nursing his aching head, "is the message written on the stump about the blacks."

That was a puzzler. No one did. It seemed so meaningless. But Albert Edward listening to the others drew his own conclusions and as there was no other solution they perforce accepted it.

"The sails of the galleon were visible to him," he said. "When he saw his honor approaching he regarded him as a messenger. Possibly the other miscreant was not entirely in his counsels. He might have disapproved of bloodshed. The messengers were best detained on the margin of the main. Also if the atrocity had been discovered while he was securing the precious gems it might be attributed to the aboriginal inhabitants. Once he had had them he only had to apply a light to that conglomeration of inflammable material—he had arranged the place and whoof—"

Albert Edward was dramatic. His listeners accepted his solution. It was a horrible and diabolical scheme but an excellent one foiled by the merest chance.

"And I only feared him as a gossip!" said Cheery drawing a long breath.

"I always knew," said Jonathan, "this was no place for a woman."

"If it hadn't been for a woman," said Cheery, "Dave would probably have had the pearls in his belt—" she paused and shut her eyes. Some things are too terrible to contemplate. All the country side would have been in flames if that little fire had been lighted.

"Well anyhow back you go now."

But that is not at all certain. Arnold Doughty felt he must settle sometime. Why not here? It is good country. Pearling has its attractions and if there were three of them to look after Cheery—

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(*The April Everybody's is on sale March 20th*).

WAYS *that are* DARK

By
L. G. Blochman

Chinese Bandits and an American Reporter

BILLY HOOK looked up from his typewriter to behold a ragged, barefooted coolie contemplating him with a gaze that was unusally intelligent for one in his attire.

"Outside!" shouted Hook. "What do you mean coming into people's houses like this?"

The coolie grinned, disclosing an octave of yellow teeth. Then he bowed his head, uncoiled a long tress of coarse black hair, detached a small folded envelope which was fastened into the mesh with a piece of thread, dropped the paper on Hook's table, and silently walked away, arranging his hair.

Hook brushed aside the envelope impatiently and returned to his typewriter. He was composing an important document. Martha Long's semi-weekly letter from Peking took precedence over everything else in China.

It was six months now that he had been writing to Martha. There had been some talk of a hurried wedding and a honeymoon to the Orient when Billy was sent to Peking to reorganize the bureau of the *Star-Transcript*, but it was only talk. Born and raised in Shanghai, where his father had been American Consul, Billy had strictly practical notions about the Far East. He had seen foreigners in China lose wives as easily as they lose dress-studs, and without knowing exactly why. Servants are so cheap and plentiful that a woman has nothing to do but spend half her time devising some means of making the other half pass more quickly. And young men are much more numerous than women in the foreign settlements in China. Thus Martha stayed behind while Billy Hook went east to carry out the managing editor's injunction to "make the news so hot we won't mind the cable tolls."

When Hook arrived in Peking the *Star-Transcript* bureau consisted of Harold Persons, a fairly intelligent youth whose uncle owned stock in the paper, installed in an ex-Taoist temple he had taken over on the bankruptcy of the high priest. There were six one-roomed structures grouped around a flagged courtyard. Five were now devoted to the service of journalism and the comfort of its votaries. The priest was allowed to remain in the sixth with his religious paraphernalia providing he did not beat gongs before eight in the morning.

For half a year Hook had kept Peking on

the front page. There was always something sensational happening in the Chinese capital, even when the seat of the sensation was in the Hook brain. His purpose was twofold: First, young Persons was to learn by example how to capture the banner headline. The sooner he learned, the sooner Hook and Martha Long could give up foreign correspondence and devote their time to domestic affairs. Second, the recurrence of the name William Hook at the top of momentous cable stories was building him an influential place in the home office.

Persons was not falling in rapidly with Hook's methods. He had once given great promise by outwitting the Japanese censor at Vladivostok and slipping through the first cable on the Nikolaievsk massacre. In Peking, however, he saw nothing more than the conservative *communiqués* of the government publicity office. Not that Persons did not know Peking. He did. He was always gossiping with the Taoist priest, or going on nocturnal excursions with the *Star-Transcript* translator into dark side streets. He probably knew more about the undercurrent of Peking than Hook. Yet he was as cautious of the feeling of the Foreign Office as though he were one of those correspondents who hope to be decorated with the Order of the Dragon and made adviser to the government at a fat salary. Still, Hook knew he had to teach him to strike the typewriter keys with a more audacious forefinger before he could leave the bureau in his charge.

Hook finished his letter to Martha and tore open the envelope left by the coolie. He glanced at the neat rows of ideographs and called Persons.

"Get this translated right away," he said as his assistant entered the temple unit which had been converted into an editorial sanctum by the installation of suitable furniture, a map of China, a typewriter, a decanter of whisky, and an artistically out-of-focus photograph of a blonde with the cross-light making a halo of her hair.

PERSONS went out, perusing the message. He was as different from Hook physically as he was mentally. The only things they had in common were the Taoist Temple and the habit of wearing cane and gray gloves to the Foreign Office press conferences. Persons was blond, tall, and rangy; Hook was dark, almost stocky, with symptoms of an impending double chin. Persons had the aristocratic grace and smoothness of a professional dancer; Hook was as democratic as a prize-fighter seeking publicity, with the aggressive bearing of an insurance salesman which stopped just two miles short of offensiveness.

Persons returned a few moments later.

"Did that chit come by mail?" he asked.

"No. A coolie brought it. Why?"

"It's from General Liao. Probably delivered by one of his Peking agents."

"Where has he got them planted, these agents?"

"Various places. One of them keeps a sausage shop in the Tartar city."

General Liao was feared as much as he was hated by the existing Peking government. He was a constant menace to the capital from the north, with his outposts scattered among the hills just beyond the Great Wall, and the main body of his troops garrisoned south of Kalgan. He had one of the best-trained of the numerous personal armies infesting China, largely the work of an American known as Brigadier-General Thompson. One week when news was dull, Hook had painted Liao as a sort of Garibaldi, fighting to free China from the Japanese-controlled rule of grafting politicians and grasping militarists. To a Chinese general without a finger in the Peking pie, all governments are dishonest and all other generals are selfishly ambitious. But Hook made Liao a noble figure and built up a great romance around Thompson, "an idealistic American who had placed his fortune and his services at the disposal of Liao for the cause of a free and unified China." As a matter of fact, before he was dubbed brigadier-general by Liao, Thompson was a sergeant honorably discharged from the American infantry brigade at Tientsin, and his fortune consisted of one month's pay and a copy of the "Infantry Drill Regulations." But he was a good soldier and had taught Liao's army how to fight in extended order.

"What does Liao have to say?" asked Hook.

"He is grateful to you unto eternity," read Persons, "for the good you have done for his just cause. Following the prodigious working of your erudite writing-brush, many purveyors of arms and munitions from Germany and from Russia have come to the camp of the general. He has already secured two dozen machine-guns and ten field pieces on credit. He prays the learned scribe to command his services in case of need."

Hook laughed.

"Good old Liao," he said. "He ought to be good for a follow-up story soon."

"The Foreign Office would like to poison us for the last story, Mr. Hook." Hook's democracy was of an indulgent kind which led men to speak of him as "Bill" but to him as "mister." "Wong is pretty sore about your talk of graft and your glorification of a 'rebel,' as he calls Liao. He threatens to bar the *Star-Transcript* from press conferences."

"He doesn't dare." Hook advanced his undershot jaw a trifle. "That Anglicized Chink knows he can't bully the *Star-Transcript* as he does some of those other sheets."

THE morning following the receipt of the letter from General Liao, Hook hopped into his private 'ricksha to attend the weekly audience which Wong of the Foreign Office granted accredited newspaper-men. It was a clear, cold, Peking winter morning, usually a sign that news would be scarce, for there is little fighting when the mercury is low. On dull days, Hook attended conferences himself. When something obvious was happening, he sent Persons. This morning he was nursing the germ of a story which needed imaginative treatment, and those who saw Hook's 'ricksha stop in front of the imposing occidental façade of the Wai-chiao-pu might guess that something of moment was about to take place. The impending sensation was assuming form as Hook walked through the spacious corridors to the audience room.

The government would give a lot to crush Liao. It could not frankly seek Japanese aid. Why not a Japanese Legion, a skeleton brigade of trained Japanese soldiers with the ranks and colors furnished by some minor tuchun loyal to Peking and the pro-Japanese *Anfuite régime?* All Hook needed was some statement from the government spokesman to set the armies at grips—on his typewriter.

There were a dozen correspondents seated about the long, green-baize covered table when he entered, drinking jasmine tea and smoking the government's gold-tipped cigarets. At the head of the conference table was Wong Yee, Oxford-educated under-secretary whose natural oriental guile, coupled with his acquired British suavity, made him an ideal man to evade the questions and allay the suspicions of journalists. He neatly parried the queries of Grosvenor, bespectacled editor of the Peking *English Daily*, on the subject of reconciliation with Canton. He satisfied Von Stein, representative of the former Stinnes papers regarding railway concessions. He assured Adams of the Unified Press that the Ichang incident was being amicably settled, and that he could give him an official statement next week. All questions he disposed of with that affability and graciousness which the English call a " 'varsity manner."

"Say, Wong." Hook's nasal staccato broke into the even sociable tenor of the conference. "What's this I hear about a Japanese force being raised in Peking for operations against General Liao?"

Wong's lips straightened just a trifle. For a fraction of a second his Oxford veneer struggled with an expression of antipathy—then in a flash reasserted itself.

"The Foreign Office knows nothing of it," said Wong with a bland English smile which did not quite match the hostile oriental glitter in his tiny black eyes. "Some malicious rumor, very likely"

And the discussion turned to the new governor of Shansi Province and the president's New Year's reception.

But Wong did not forget Hook's question any more than Hook forgot the momentary change of expression which passed across Wong's face, nor the glitter in his eye as he answered it. When the correspondents started filling their cases with government cigarets before leaving, Hook got up and drifted carelessly toward the head of the table.

"May I have a word with you, Mr. Hook?" asked Wong.

"Sure," Hook replied. The Foreign Office warnings had always been delivered through Persons in the past. He was anxious to hear Wong deliver his own little sermon about embarrassing inaccuracy, slanderous falsehoods, and the sacred duty of the press.

WONG led the way to a private room. When the door was closed he told Hook that his talents had attracted the attention of the prime minister, who would like very much to enlist him in the services of the great Chinese Republic. Would he consider accepting a position as adviser to the Department of Education?

If Hook was surprised, he did not show it. He could fill a straight on a two-card draw without blinking an eye, and he received as calmly the intimation that advisory jobs were being handed out as bribes for silence, as well as rewards for docility. Well, he would see the cards, anyway.

"What's it all about, Wong?" he asked.

"There has been a sudden vacancy, Mr. Hook, and we want a capable man. It would pay you to look into the proposition."

"How much?"

"Twice as much as your present salary."

Wong looked at Hook with insistence and Hook looked out the window. A couple could live royally in Peking on that money and save in the bargain. Martha could go into ecstacies over a house full of Chinese rugs, brass Buddhas and carved ivories, with a whole army of servants to take care of her slightest needs. That was just the point—too many servants. She would have to have them, everybody did. Then, after six months or a year, when the novelty had worn off and idleness began to weigh on her—

"Nothing doing, Wong," said Hook, out of the right side of his mouth.

"I would strongly advise you accept," said Wong. "Very strongly. I think you would regret having allowed this chance to pass."

"Doesn't interest me, Wong." Hook stood up. "It's a little out of my line."

The dapper little Chinese rose also, and looked the newspaperman straight in the eye with one of those oriental stares which seem to start deep within the brain somewhere.

"Of course, you know best what you want to do, Mr. Hook," he said. "We will forget about it, if you like."

But Hook didn't. He was thinking about the morning's incidents as his lanky 'ricksha coolie caught sight of him standing under the *porte-cochère* and rambled over, trailing his vehicle behind him. Bit by bit he patched together the train of events—his question about the Japanese Legion, Wong's flicker of hostility, and the sudden offer of a government post as though to ward off publicity for the moment. One might readily think there was something in the story—a spark that the Foreign Office feared might be fanned into an embarrassing flame. Hook knew that there were vague reports of Japanese troops fighting in Chinese uniforms almost every time that Chang Tso-lin's Manchurin forces went into battle. He had never seen any proof of the rumor, which might easily have originated from one of the many propaganda bureaus situated in Peking. Was he now to find an actual instance of Japanese intervention in the Chinese civil war?

He started out to pick up the loose ends of the story when he met an American sewing-machine salesman from up-country, come to Peking for his monthly jag. The meeting delayed Hook's detective work until the rounds of the most respected drinking places in the Legation Quarter had been duly made. But even over the festive Scotch and soda of the Wagons-Lits bar he pondered momentarily on the possible relation between Japanese opposition to General Liao and the significant stare Wong had given him on parting. But it lost its significance as evening came on, veiled in rosy alcoholic clouds.

IT WAS dark when Hook stepped out of the Peking Club into the cold wind of mid-December. His fluent curses in Shanghai dialect aroused his 'ricksha puller from an impromptu fan-tan game which had sprung up behind the building.

"Home!" he directed.

The lanky coolie lengthened his strides toward the Fish-Sellers' Hutung, that narrow alley just within the Yellow Imperial Wall—which is really pink—where the Temple of the *Star-Transcript* was located. The bitingly cold air was filled with the strange noises of a Chinese evening: The guttural shouts of quarreling coolies, the cry of the persimmon vender, presiding over his pile of golden fruit; the quavering falsetto song of the seller of bean curds, trudging along the side of the road, his wares dangling in wooden buckets from the two ends of his shoulder-pole. Hook was leaning back in his 'ricksha with a feeling of comfortable inertness as his puller passed the tile-capped wall and turned into the maze of dark alleys which led to the editorial shrine. Adviser to the Department of Education! Even Persons would have to laugh, Persons who was usually too polite to laugh. Yes, undoubtedly.

"Hi!" shouted Hook's coolie, trying to

slow up as two unlighted 'rickshas darted suddenly out of a cross alley and turned toward him. There was the clash of locked wheels and Hook found himself sprawling on the ground with something very heavy on his chest.

"Get off, can't you," remarked Hook, observing that the passenger of the other vehicle made no move to let him up.

FOR a reply a grimy hand covered his face and some one he couldn't see pinioned his arms and slipped a rope loop over his legs. Before he had time to realize what had happened he was dragged over the frozen ground into the cross alley where, by the flicker of a paper lantern, he saw three men standing beside a wheelbarrow, one of those very useful Chinese vehicles with the wheel, as big as the whole cart, bisecting the carrier. A large pig was tied to one side of the wheel-guard.

As Hook saw two men holding the mouth of a spacious gunny sack, he was picked up and put into the bag head first, swearing glibly in two languages. The human package was made fast to the other side of the wheel-guard to balance the porker. The third man put his neck into the coolie harness that took some of the weight of the shafts from his arms, and moved down the dark alley. The pig grunted, Hook swore fiercely, and the great wooden wheel, an entire stranger to grease, creaked and screamed far louder than either of the unwilling passengers. And when Hook increased his futile threats and yelled colorful adjectives at the top of his voice, the barrow man—for he was alone now—added the chanting "ho-heh ho-heh" of a busy coolie to the dry screech of the complaining wheel, the wondering grunts from the captive pig, and the American profanity from the gunny-sack parcel.

A coolie was bringing his produce to the Peking market, that was all. Then the parcel became silent, the wheelbarrow creaked on, turned into Chao Yang Men Street, and hurried toward the Tartar wall.

Busy Chao Yang Men Street, with its two outer lanes for the studded wheels of the springy Manchu carts and the central lane for lighter traffic, took no notice of the barrow carrying the pig and the burlap-wrapped correspondent of the *Star-Transcript*. Along the sides were shops with gilded fronts and others with intricately carved doors and angry dragons looking out from under the eaves. Itinerant places of business were moving up and down with their chanting proprietors. There were squads of water distributors, with icicles hanging from the two wooden tubs of each wheelbarrow, shivering beggars, more wheelbarrows, and occasionally a honking auto, looking strangely out of place in this street otherwise unchanged in appearance for centuries.

About the time Hook had begun to swear again and gasp for breath and complain of his cramped position, the wheelbarrow creaked up the shadowy bulk of the Tartar wall, the great gate tower looming above in tenebrous massiveness. Somewhere up there in the shadows a gong was clanging, and stragglers were streaming through the gate, scurrying to get into the city before the heavy doors were swung shut, leaving them at the mercy of the great Chinese banditry—or unpaid soldiery, which is the same thing.

Hook's wheelbarrow man was apparently not afraid of what lay beyond the wall. Once through the gate he stopped and a covered two-wheeled Manchu cart rumbled up. Three men jumped out, and one of them slit the gunny sack with a long knife that glittered faintly in the light of a half-covered moon. Hook stuck out his head and gasped. He felt a cold circle of steel pressed against his temple, and seemed to understand exactly what was expected of him. Some one felt in his pockets to make sure he was not armed. He made no attempt to get away when his thongs were cut, but climbed meekly into the cart and squatted on the floor as it bumped along, leaving in the distance the noise and shouts of Peking closing its gates. The gong on the wall grew fainter and fainter. Then it stopped and there was only the rumble of wheels.

ALL night long he rode on the floor of the Manchu cart while the little Mongolian pony trotted ahead at a steady pace. One of his captors drove, one slept, and a third occasionally poked something hard into his ribs to remind him that he was to behave. The inside of the cart was dark, and only the breathing of the four men indicated that it was occupied. Attempts at conversation meeting with failure, Hook dozed off, cramped and jolted by the primitive cart, looking into the crafty black eyes of the suave Wong Yee, which seemed to stare at him from out the darkness. And that stare answered all his questions.

Amid the sing-song clatter of a dialect unfamiliar to him, Hook was dragged forth into the daylight to be scrutinized by half a dozen bandit soldiers, clad in padded gray uniforms and fur caps with ear-flaps. One, apparently the leader, wore the pink collar facings and tall kepi of the Mukden army. The others were typical provincial soldiers, who, unpaid by their generals, are forced into pillage and banditry to make a living.

Hook had no idea where he was. He had been traveling all night; he must be forty miles from Peking. North, perhaps. The rugged character of the country suggested Nankow Pass or beyond. There was no sign of life in the barren, rocky ravine to which his nocturnal trip had brought him; only the six soldiers and a lightly loaded donkey. The Manchu cart turned back down the ravine, and Hook, stiff and sore from sleeping in a knot, limped along in the opposite direction in front of the muzzle of a Mauser rifle.

He seemed to be in the particular custody of a shrewd-looking little fellow, who, with his fluent knowledge of pidgin-English, acted as interpreter. He kept up a steady conversation as the caravan advanced.

"You sabey Shanghai?" he inquired.

"What about it?"

"Then you sabe Asto' Hotel. Befo' my b'long Numbah Two ba'-boy Asto' Hotel. Make plenty cocktail. Now b'long Numbah Six bandit. Make mo' money."

"How much do you expect to make off this deal?"

"Bimeby you lite lettah, ask plenty money."

THEY trudged along the bottoms of rocky gullies, avoiding the ridges. The ex-bar-boy prattled on about the ransom letter which was to be written. Hook grunted his disbelief. A demand for ransom would act as a blind and give the appearance of a bona-fide kidnaping. Hook refused to believe, however, that ordinary bandits would single him out as their victim, particularly within ear-shot of the Legation Quarter. He was convinced that he was being kept out of the way during a crucial moment, and being scared into accepting the propositions that governments have no conscience, and that meddling journalists should not thrust too long a nose into government affairs. Still, if he was not to be shot, he would prefer to be rescued by force or allowed to escape. Ransom was so conventional and proper. If he could only get word to Persons to send out troops, Hook might effect a journalistic coup of first magnitude. But Persons wasn't the man to arrange battles. He was too cautious and unimaginative. The ransom would probably suit him better.

Persons had, as a matter of fact, done the conventional thing when Hook's coolie dragged the empty 'ricksha into the temple compound, excitedly yelling an incoherent story. He had notified the Foreign Office and the American Legation, and the Foreign Office had expressed its regrets to the American Minister, promising to cooperate fully in the apprehension of the kidnapers—which is all as regular as lodge ritual. If Persons suspected that the Foreign Office was not particularly interested in rescuing Hook, no one else knew of it. Fellow correspondents watched Persons closely thinking that the *Star-Transcript* was staging another of its own sensations. Once they thought they were hot on a new clue when they followed Persons on a night excursion into the Tartar city. But he merely stopped at a sausage shop and talked for a moment with a grinning, pot-bellied oriental with a black satin skull-cap; Persons always did have a penchant for odd characters. Apparently the kidnaping was regular and above board, and the terrible Hook was actually *hors de combat*.

Hook was not, however, afflicted with paralysis of the tongue.

"Have you got a brother or a cousin or an uncle in Mukden or Japan?" Hook was inquiring of the interpreter.

"No. My uncle live 'Melica-side. He name Ling, all same my. He have got coffee-house in Vallejo."

Ling nephew would like to go to America too, he said, but it was too expensive. Firemen on Japanese ships wanted five hundred dollars to smuggle in one Chinaman. Even Chinese clerks in American consulates asked three hundred dollars for a fake visa.

"I can get you passports as a student," said Hook, "if you want them bad enough."

Ling shut up like an embarrassed girl, but there was an air of expectancy about his assumed expression of injured righteousness.

"If you will get a letter to Peking for me by tomorrow," continued Hook, "I'll guarantee to put you down in San Francisco duty free and postage prepaid."

THE noon halt put a stop to negotiations. Hook shared rice and water, and the caravan pushed on again. The early and abrupt darkness found them approaching a half-ruined hut, perhaps once a temple. That it had not been inhabited for years was evident from the fact that the Spirit Wall, the barrier standing before all Chinese portals to keep out evil spirits who fly only in straight lines, had fallen down. A roof with upturned eaves was crumbling, but two stone fish, intact, stood on their heads at the ends of the ridge-pole. Two leafless trees stood before the entrance.

Hook was left alone with the interpreter for a moment while the pink-capped chief, took his band into the house. The prisoner took a wad of manila paper from his pocket and scribbled a note to Persons:

> Search hills just north of Nankow Pass. Don't spoil yarn with ransom. Arrange to send troops—Chinese troops for color and Legation guard for action. Cable limit and dig up anti-foreign feeling angle.
> W. H.
>
> P. S.—Send camera man along.

Ling had just tucked the sheet of manila paper into the bosom of his padded coat when the bandit chief came out with a document written in Chinese. Through Ling he told Hook to put his "chop" at the bottom of a demand for twenty thousand dollars Mexican. The captive took the proffered writing brush and wrote "Pig's Ear" across the ideographs. Not only had he reason to believe that these bandits were working on a straight salary, but he was offended by the low figure of the ransom.

A burly Manchu, larger than the leader and apparently second in command, kept the muzzle of a rifle in Hook's back while the correspondent built a fire in the hut. As the wavering flame bronzed the circle of Chinese faces and cast grotesque shadows on the walls, the captive was allowed to sit by the questionable warmth. The big Manchu fingered Hook's thin trousers and shrugged his shoulders as he compared them to his own padded pants, bound about the ankles to keep out the breezes that sent chills up Hook's legs. Then he proceeded to empty Hook's pockets. The captive said nothing when the Manchu took his watch and wallet, but when he took a dove-gray envelope addressed in a back-hand to Mr. William Hook, sniffed it and passed it to the others to smell, Billy threw one man into the fire, and half-strangled another before he was finally subdued by the combined efforts of the entire company. The chief kicked him in the stomach by way of reprimand, tore up the gray letter and threw the pieces into his face.

Whether it was the painful breathlessness that gripped him for ten seconds, or whether it was the ignominy of being kicked, something punctured the self-confidence which Hook had carried with him until now. The pride of race, the sense of superiority he had felt over his captors until this moment, collapsed like a toy balloon run afoul of a hatpin.

The thought that Ling would get his message through to Peking reassured him somewhat, and he stood up to spit contemptuously into the fire. Then he sat down in a corner to shiver himself to sleep.

In spite of his fatigue, his sleep was uneasy. He seemed to hear voices, Chinese voices, and once he was awakened by what he thought was a human cry. He listened intently but heard nothing except the cold wind worrying and whistling through the crumbled tiles on the roof. Then he dozed off again.

When next he awoke, the sky was gray with the dismal half-light of a cloudy dawn. A squatting oriental with a gun against his knees, made a silhouette in the doorway. Beyond him a bare tree stood out like a great skeleton. There was something hanging from one of the branches at the end of a rope, something long which seemed to be turning slowly in the last breath of the night wind. Hook straightened up, seized with sudden apprehension.

The soldier in the doorway jumped to his feet and came over to poke Hook unceremoniously in the chest with the butt of his gun. It was the big Manchu.

"You think nobody understand your talk," he said in very fair English. "So do he," indicating with a nod the body dangling from the tree. "So do he. Both wrong. I learn English in mission college in Shansi side. Please don't write more communication. My Christian teacher say never be deceivingful."

And he slapped Hook across the face for emphasis.

A TRAGIC despair had seized Hook when he first saw the corpse of his volunteer messenger dangling before his eyes. He had at first regarded the adventure as an unpleasant interlude framed to remind him that he was a foreigner in a sovereign land. Now he felt that his position was serious. If Wong had ordered this done, he had ordered it done thoroughly. If a life must be sacrificed in order that the plan be carried out, the sacrifice would be made readily and efficiently.

The Manchu's slap had crystallized despair into determination, no longer a determination to convert his adventure into a journalistic triumph, but a determination to get away, to get back to Peking alive, to get home.

After a bandit coucil of war, decidedly argumentative, lasting until the sun was high in the sky, the convoy got under way again, less numerous by one. As they climbed the little ridge back of the ruined house, Hook got his first bearings. About five miles away to the right he could see the Great Wall of China, a colossal snake of drab masonry, winding and twisting over the monotonous brown of the barren hills.

The caravan plodded forward in silence, following a course parallel to the Wall. The chief bore a sour expression on his solemn face, indicating that he had been out-argued. Being a wise leader of bandits, however, he was amenable to majority reasoning.

After five hours' walking, when the shadows were very long and the wind was very cold, the party arrived at a cluster of three mud houses which apparently served as a caravanserai for donkey trains coming from Mongolia. There were scores of tiny donkeys, just relieved of packs larger than themselves, standing about dumbly with their hind legs hobbled. There was a mangy white chow dog which left off sniffing the hoofs of the animals to bark impertinently at the new arrivals. There were four donkey drivers, there was an evil-looking old Chinese with one eye gone and five long hairs trailing from under his nose in the rough semblance of a mustache, there was a younger Chinese, and there was opium.

It appeared that the bandit chief had no objection to opium as a business, but as a form of diversion he had distinct scruples against its use during working hours. He had been outvoted by his subordinates, but to insure against their getting overopiated, he borrowed an extra pair of donkey hobbles from the old man with one eye. He hobbled Hook very securely and tied his hands behind his back. Then he took the gun and money away from the big Manchu, appropriated the firearms of the rest of the band, paid for the night's entertainment in advance, and made Hook hop into one of the huts ahead of him.

The hut consisted of one room with a pile of Tientsin rag rugs in the center of the floor, and a table in one corner, where a dozen little oil lamps were sputtering on as many trays. The donkey drivers and the soldier-bandits squatted on the rugs, with Hook within kicking distance of the mission-educated Manchu. The old man with one eye brought the trays with the lamps, the pipes, and the brown stuff resembling axle-grease that sizzled into a little ball when cooked on the end of a wire over a lamp.

WHEN every one had cooked a dozen or so little brown balls and put them where they belonged, the party grew quiet. Even the chief, assuring himself that Hook was asleep, took a few pipefuls himself, and the old man, convinced that business was over for the night, joined the company in the land of the poppy. The mangy dog, which had been sniffing about all evening, made a final trip to the door, looked out, and disappeared in the shadows. Then Hook, who in feigning sleep had caught himself dozing once or twice, cautiously sat up.

He listened carefully to the heavy breathing of the smokers and a scratching and scraping from somewhere in the darkness which told of the dog settling down for the night. Then Hook wiggled into the sleeping circle until he could hold his feet over one of the lamps. His right trousers leg caught fire and blistered his ankle before the donkey hobble burned through and he could wrench his feet apart. He lay for a moment suppressing a groan as the pain welled up in his leg. Then he backed up to the lamp, holding out his arms like a Roman undergoing the ordeal of fire, and burned his wrists raw in getting rid of his rope handcuffs.

His arms and legs smarting from burns, Hook picked his way gingerly to the side of the bandit chief who was sleeping sonorously on his back with his arms tightly clasped about three rifles. There seemed to be little possibility of taking a gun or rescuing his wallet which was tucked away beneath several layers of coats. He would take a donkey, then. The animal would help him in his flight and he could sell it when he reached a settlement. He tiptoed to the door, stepped on something soft, and fell through the opening while the hut reverberated with a prolonged yelp. The mangy dog!

Billy Hook's heart thumped noisily against the frozen ground as he lay outside the door, listening, afraid to move. He heard some of the sleepers stir, and the old man calling the dog in an irritated treble to lecture him on the impropriety of nocturnal barking.

Hook crawled painfully on his hands and knees for a few paces, then arose and ran limpingly through the cold, moonlit night for a clump of rocks a hundred yards distant. Lying among the boulders he watched the hut. A figure came out, started in his direction, stopped to stare at the pile of rocks for a full minute, then went to the rear of the hut and began examining the hobbles of the donkeys. It was a driver, apparently, checking over his animals. Hook got up and ran for the nearest ridge.

All night he tramped on, his legs throbbing feverishly in spite of the biting cold wind. Guiding his march on the Great Wall which he could see faintly on the moonlit horizon, he hurried on to reach the house he had left that morning. A foreigner is always a marked man once away from the treaty ports, and a foreigner with only half a pair of trousers would have a difficult time escaping notice. He had an idea that the Peking government would not facilitate the immediate return of William Hook to the capital. He must become a Chinese soldier before daybreak, burns or no burns.

The moon was just going down when he reached the ruined building. The tree in front of the door was full of black crows which stirred uneasily and cawed once or twice as Hook undressed the corpse hanging from the limb. It was an unpleasant job, but it had to be done. If he could reach the Peking-Kalgan railway, the uniform would serve as a ticket to Peking. There isn't a railway man in all China who is brave enough or foolish enough to collect a fare from a soldier.

Although he wouldn't admit it to himself, Hook shuddered as he stepped into the clothes he had just removed from the stiffened clammy limbs of the bar-boy bandit. Then he struck out for the Great Wall.

ABOUT noon a strange looking deserter from Wu Pei-fu's army limped into Ching-lung-chiao and in Shanghai dialect called weakly for food. The itinerant restaurateur who responded was offered a gold cuff-link bearing the letter "H" for his consideration. After conferring with the station money-changer, the Chinese unslung the pole from his shoulder and delivered two bowls of rice, a dozen blood-red chicken livers impaled on a skewer, a pot of tea, a persimmon, and seventeen coppers in change. The deserter gulped the food as though he hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours. Just as he was drinking the last of the tea from the spout of the porcelain pot, the commandant of the station guard arrived on the scene. It was known, said the commandant, that the worthy warrior had upon his august person certain golden ornaments bearing foreign characters. Would the courageous and distinguished soldier step into the edifice adjacent and explain the origin of these ornaments? It happened that the distinguished warrior knew that "explanation" was in this case a synonym for "cumshaw," that oriental salve for itching palms. So he parted with the other cuff-link.

As the deserter left the building for the station platform, the commandant noticed that his uniform fitted so snugly that only half the blouse buttons would fasten. He also noticed that his shoes were too pointed for those of an honest deserter, so he telegraphed to Peking about it. Then he locked the arguing, protesting deserter in a dark, smelly room in the station.

The deserter kicked on the door in an outraged manner for ten minutes, cursing in three dialects. Then he swore for a while in English. Finally he slipped to the floor and slept as though he had not closed his eyes for several nights.

He was aroused by an uproar outside. There were shouts, guttural cries, the metallic panting of an automobile, sing-song commands, irregular rifle-fire. Suddenly above the commotion came a sharp loud rattle, as though a machine-gun were going into action. The uproar increased. The rattle recommenced, and the imprisoned deserter thought he heard the *spat-spat* of bullets imbedding themselves in the adobe wall of the station. A few rifle-shots came in answer, but the shouts seemed to be farther away. Again the familiar rattle. Then silence, broken a moment later by the noisy opening and closing of doors.

THE man in the Wu Pei-fu uniform again began banging and yelling. His cries were answered by rifle-butts crashing against the door. Through the splintered half of the upper panel he could see a *kepi*, covered with gold braid, set at a perky angle on a head of flaming red hair. A pair of confident blue eyes watched the work of demolition, while an inch of brown hand-made cigaret smoked at the corner of firm, thin-lipped mouth. Another part of a the panel crashed in, and the well-filled blouse of the conventional gray Chinese uniform came into view. The breast was covered with medals, among which the prisoner could distinguish the American Army awards for Sharpshooter, Expert Marksman and Expert Pistol Shot. Then the battered door gave way.

The red-headed soldier entered and looked quizzically at the man he had freed. Then he laughed loudly and naturally.

"I suppose you're Bill Hook, though I'd never guess it in that masquerade rig," he merrily laughed. "I'm Brigadier-General Thompson. We been looking all over hell for you since yesterday."

"Thanks," said Hook, shaking hands. "How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't, exactly. We shot up three stations along the line before we came here. Liao told me this morning that you had got loose from old Ting Loo's hop joint back in the sticks and that you'd sure make the railroad before they grabbed you again. So we just looked."

"Liao—but how did Liao know?"

"The old man's a fox," said Brigadier-General Thompson admiringly. "How does any Chink know what's going on in the next alley almost before it's happened? That's their gift. And then we got a damned good intelligence service in our army. The general's got a money-changer or a cigaret-seller in every station on every line running out of Peking, and with every bunch of donkeys or camels that goes through Nankow Pass, there's at least one guy whose eyes and ears are working for us."

Hook thought of the donkey driver who had come out of the hut when he had escaped from the snoring bandit sextette.

The former sergeant adjusted his gaudy kepi a little farther over one ear. Then he exclaimed:

"Say, but we got to start. Climb in the Dearborn limousine. I clipped the wires for a piece down the track, but they's other ways for news to travel in this man's country. I'll take you about twenty miles down where you can hop a train—if we don't get blown up before then. I don't dare rumble real close to Peking with this chariot."

Then, as the auto with the machine-gun mounted on the hood bumped along the railway ties, he added:

"And thanks for that write-up you put in your paper about me. Old Murphy—did you know Murphy? He was top soak in B Company at Tientsin when he got paid off—well, Murphy cut it out and sent it to me. You sure laid it on thick. Any time I can do something for you. . . ."

AS THE evening train shrieked to a stop under the towering Tartar wall, Hook descended from the dining-car, where the soldier dead-heads ride. Pushing through the shouting mob of baggage coolies and beggars, he bumped squarely into Adams of the Unified Press. Adams started, turned to go, hesitated, looked again, and then disappeared silently and quickly.

Back in Peking, Hook unconsciously looked upon his adventure in a professional light again. Full of the possible ignominy of having the story of his escape printed in another American paper before it appeared in his own, he started for the first place he could file a cablegram on credit. He broke into a run for the Water Gate; at the Wagons-Lits Hotel he was known; they would cable for him.

But the red-turbaned Sikh stationed at the hotel entrance to keep out undesirables barred the way with his three-foot club. When the grimy soldier insisted on making for the plate-glass door, the bearded giant pushed him in the face and kicked him in the very seat of the late Ling's padded uniform.

The merriment among the 'ricksha pullers awaiting fares across from the hotel subsided immediately when the supposed soldier approached on a run. One of them stepped forward timidly.

"Fish-Sellers' Hutung in a hurry," ordered the outraged soldier.

Persons was hammering on the typewriter when the unkempt figure of the plump Billy Hook appeared in the circular portal of the ex-Taoist temple.

"Send somebody out to pay my 'ricksha," demanded the prodigal.

"Oh, hello," said Persons without turning around. "Your boy will do it for you. He's in fixing your bath. There's a whisky I just poured out for you."

"Whisky be hanged," said Hook, somewhat taken back by the coolness of his reception. "Let me on that machine. We've got to send out a flash right away. Adams saw me at the station and he has half an hour on us. If we—"

"The story's gone already," said Persons, getting up to shake hands with his boss. He couldn't help smiling as he noted the baffled look on Hook's dirty, unshaven face. "I filed it this afternoon. I didn't think you'd mind. I signed your name to it. While I didn't expect you until tonight, I wanted to beat the world on the story. The boys have been hot on your trail."

Hook sank into a chair, frankly amazed at the workings of his own office.

"If you expected me, why didn't you meet me?"

"And give the story away? Not much," was the reply. "Every correspondent in Peking would have been at my heels, which wouldn't have been right, considering that the yarn is really ours. I've kept it as exclusive as possible. Of course they've filed reams of routine stuff, but they haven't your story—the details of your suffering, your battle with the bandits, your escape, and all that. We have scored clean on that."

"And where did you get it?"

"Imagination," Persons grinned. "Have you not been teaching me the virtues of imagination for the last six months? But I had a few facts, too. When Wong told me he feared you had fallen into desperate hands and that I must not expect any immediate results, I got out General Liao's letter of gratitude and went around to see his man in the sausage shop in the Tartar city. When I told them who seemed to have engineered the kidnaping, they went right to the bat. Not only did they get results, but they sent me bulletins by scavengers and sausage venders twice a day. They told me you were on the last train."

"Good old Liao," said Hook, taking off his coat. "But there is one cable I want to send anyhow. It you'll let me on that machine—"

"I hope you won't think I'm presuming," said Persons apologetically, "but I sent that too. I didn't think it would be right for her to hear the glad tidings from the newspapers first."

HOOK let his sore wrists fall with a bang on the arms of his chair. "Pass me that whisky," he said. "Is there anything else I've done that I don't know about?"

"I'm afraid that's all," replied Persons. "I didn't have time for much more."

"You'll have plenty of time from now on." Hook, with his head a little to one side, was regarding his assistant with the gratified air of a schoolmaster whose star pupil has made a perfect recitation on visitors' day. "I think I'll go home by way of Shanghai. It'll be the last time I cross the Pacific, too. I'm through with this oriental stuff—too sensational. You seem to have a silent hankering after this Far Eastern intrigue and more talent than I suspected for gumming up the works when the wheels turn too fast. You're welcome. I'm going to get me a flat in Brooklyn and settle down to be an honest press agent or editor of an Aunt Susy column."

Billy Hook was looking critically at the blisters on his wrists.

"The *Star-Transcript* ought to make a great splash with the bandit battles, especially if you put in lots of color," he said. "That's a real story, if it's done right. I wonder if you could let me take the carbon copies of your cables on my little party. I ought to have time on the boat to work them up into a darned fine Sunday magazine feature."

A MAN'S MEASURE

By Harold Titus

A Novelette Proving One Man's Death May Be Another Man's Redemption

HE STOOD against the wall opposite Papa Pertwee's bar, alone in a room clamorous with the free mingling of many men. Rumpled clothes of a cut never originating or even sold in Chester's Dump or any other Michigan logging town hung from his broad shoulders and supple waist. His shirt was open, his head bare and on his face was a kindly, vacant smile, touched by wistfulness.

It was a big night for Papa and for the Dump it was to be even a bigger night; in fact, it was to be a night of nights although that, of course, was not dreamed of early in the evening. But even its beginnings were of unusual proportions with Bob McIver, the new tug-boat captain, just up from below to tow booms of old man Chester's logs down-river, making inroads on his roll of bills, Pertwee's stock of liquor and the sober population of the town.

The bar was lined full. The low room blue with smoke, filled with heat from the camp stove and the smell of damp woolens; the sounds of rough voices, the gritting scuff of river-boots as calks bit into the speckled pine floor—a vigorous bit of play by vigorous men.

But Thad Chester stood apart and smiled wistfully, as if he wanted to be what he was not: like other men.

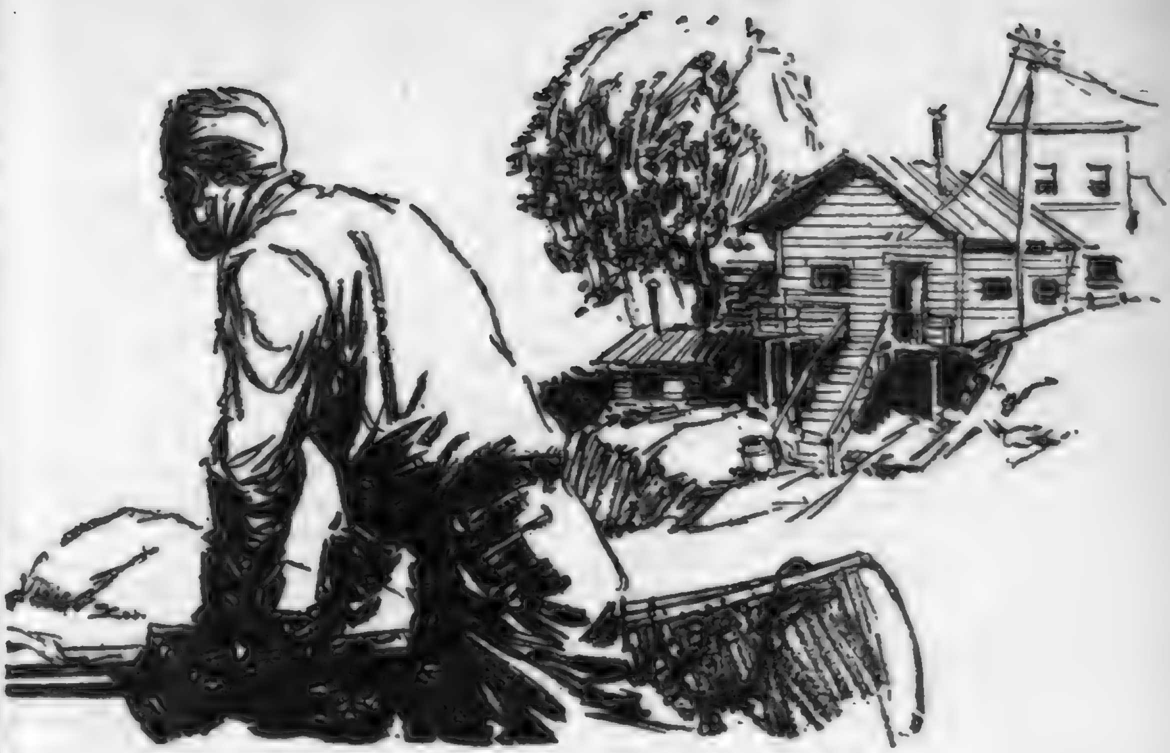
Once more the big stranger turned toward him and waved imperiously.

"Step up, chum, an' try th' poison!"

Deep down in his hazy consciousness an impulse to acknowledge the invitation struggled upward and died out. He just stood there and smiled his pathetic smile, and the other turned to his drinking with a shrug.

Young Chester was trying to remember what he had started to do. It was so long ago that he had made up his mind—he had resolved on something—sure! He would go home. That was it! Go to the shanty where he lived alone on the river bank and sleep—sure; that was it! And yet he had not gone; could not go now, even when he remembered. And soon, if he tarried, he would pitch over and lie where he fell until youth's vitality burned out the poison that numbed body and brain, unless some one helped him home—

SIGHTS and sound were hazy. He saw the new tug-boat man turn to look at him again as Tim Bryant, boss of Camp Seven, elbow on the bar, talked confidentially to him. So Bryant was explaining



why old man Chester's son just stood against the wall and smiled when asked to drink! The idea came foggily and he did not care, much, that his delinquencies were being discussed by one of his father's hired men and a stranger. That was part of being son of the push. Just so long as they treated him with the respect due.

Thad's uncertain idea was correct. He was being talked about.

"Don't mean nothin'," assured Bryant. "Don't mean nothin' a-tall, McIver! He's be'n drunk for months. Sometimes he's most all right; lot of th' time he's like he is now, and now 'nd then he gits plumb helpless!"

"An up-an'-comin' young scion, eh?" boomed the good-natured McIver and looked along the bar.

"We can't gain on her this way, lads!" he roared. "Sure 're never goin' to git to th' bottom if we don't git spry. What's th' soundin' rod show, Daddy?" His gray eyes twinkled at the stringy, bearded proprietor who made no reply to his jocularity. "Four foot 'n th' hold? Come on, lads, we ain't gainin' a drop!"

Pertwee responded with no flicker of a smile but he moved with alacrity, the bottle thumped along the bar, cloudy glasses filled, another bill was peeled from McIver's roll and he turned to Bryant again.

"Yeah? So th' push sired a prime drunkard, eh? Sent him up here to be got from under foot?"

Bryant twisted his head seriously. "N'sir! Not so! Sent him up for ol' Tom Tolman, who's cruised for Chester since he bought his first forty, to make a man of. That's what, an' dam' my eyes if he didn't make a start! That kid, he goes into th' woods first winter an' starts just like anybody else would, swampin'. He sure catched on an' afore spring he was top-loadin' an' doin' a spry job of it, too!

"Wa'n't no man's fool on th' river when we drove, neither. Chester had a option on some pulp stuff acrost in Canady an' Tolman went to cruise it an' took th' kid with him. Come back, he says th' kid's gone a long ways toward gettin' to be a man. Why, everybody liked him; didn't seem to be stuck-up or nothin' an' he seemed allus to do what he set out ontil it come to th' girl."

"Woman, eh?" McIver crooked his elbow, jerked his head backward, set down the glass and wiped his lips with a loud smack." "*Woman*, eh?"

"Sure. Little, yellah headed one, no bigger 'n my arm! She's Haynes' niece." (Haynes was superintendent of all the Chester operations in woods and on the river.) "He went plumb dotty over her an' she's only a little hoity-toity swell thing but she wouldn't have him an' so he took to hooch to drown his sorrows."

Well, well and a coupla red-hot damns, commented Mr. McIver. Now, think of that. And he didn't mean nothin' by not answerin' but was just so boiled he couldn't cough up a word or choke down a swaller, eh? Well, well, and some more rolling oaths, he'd bet old Chester wasn't all swoll up with pride about his rightful an' lawful an' likely legitimate heir!

"Right-o!" vouched Bryant. "Clean disgusted, he is. An' so's Tom Tolman, though he does sorta look after Thad to see he don't flop onto a hot stove or into th' river. Th' Dump'd be disgusted, too, if he wasn't who he is. 'Course, might say th' town's disgusted now, but it won't do to let him know he's got us that way. Not much!"

He leaned closer: "Mebby things'll git even worse. She's come home!"

"Be'n away?"

"Off to some high-toned school in New York or some such town. She come home this afternoon. Expeck he'll git *real* drunk when he finds that out!"

IT WAS at this point that McIver turned again to young Chester and Thad had the fuzzy but correct idea that he was under discussion and did not care. But even had he cared it is not likely he would have gone on with caring at that moment because the door opened and Red Bart Delaney entered the room.

He stepped in just as a great shout of laughter rose and his coming sent that laughter down to mumbles before it reached the height toward which it surely had been bound.

He stood a moment, looking about truculently. Then, without so much as a nod to any one, his squat, powerful body moving with a rolling swagger, his slouch-hatted red head thrust forward from his huge shoulders, he walked to take a place at the end of the bar.

Papa Pertwee mummed his chew more briskly and his scraggly mustache and beard came hard together as his jaws worked.

"Roll 'em in, daddy!" boomed McIver. "Speak up, chum, an' give it a name!"

This last was to Delaney and the man turned his bright blue eyes with their rings of white on the tug-boat captain in cold scrutiny.

"I buy my own whisky," he announced sourly and quirked a thumb at Papa.

The proprietor moved with a haste that had not even been inspired by the great profit accruing from McIver's generosity and clapped bottle and whisky glass before the newcomer. Bart picked up the latter and eyed it balefully. Then he tossed it splintering to the floor.

"Bring me somethin' as 'll hold a man's swaller," he growled and Papa, hissing an acquiescent whisper, trotted to fetch a tumbler.

McIver scratched his head and swore a sputtering oath.

"That beats!" he added, "a lotta hostyle folks in this locality." He arched his brows and blew from puffed cheeks in amazement. He squinted at Thad Chester. "First him; an' now a red-headed party who thinks poison ain't a beverage but bath water. Le's th' rest of us proceed!"

Bryant, during this, had plucked his sleeve and tried to hush him, but McIver gave no heed until the glasses were filled and talk had started up again, less boisterous, more self-conscious than it had been before.

"What's th' trouble?" he then asked genially. "What's all th' shooshin' for?" Bryant, back toward the end of the bar, winked slowly and rocked his head in an indicating gesture.

"Him," he said cautiously. "That's Red Bart Delaney."

"Oh-ho!" McIver eyed the red Irishman. "Heard 'bout that party!"

"Sure! Who ain't? Who ain't, in this part of Michigan an' large parts of Canady? He's a bad customer, him! Rougher'n a bar of pig-iron. He's fit his way up an' down an' acrost an' back an' the' ain't anybody left for him to fight in this here locality, where he hangs out most. Only way to git along 's to leave him be. If he don't kill somebody afore he's through his bullyin', I miss my guess!"

"Ho!" snorted McIver scornfully. "I guess he ain't so bad as all that! Th' higher they fly—" He looked up and down the bar again.

"Come, daddy, what's th' well show? We ain't gainin' a inch? Damn us all, lads, every one; le's try th' pumps again!"

And so on, while the hours stretched to their greatest length and Thad Chester stood smiling and finally turned and walked slowly to the rear as if to go out and seek his shanty by the river. But when he reached the spotty pool-table he stopped and stood there as the fight started and did not even turn to look, but after a time slumped forward on his face and flopped over and lay still.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS Papa Pertwee's determination to keep all his transactions regular which sprouted the seed of trouble that Red Bart always sowed about him.

Papa looked into the face with its fringe of red beard stubble and mummed his chew with incredible speed.

"But you ain't a-paid for th' last un!" he protested.

Delaney quirked his thumb for the bottle. (He was leaning indolently against crossed fore arms.) "A drink, I said," he growled.

"I never run no tick, Delaney, 'n you know it!" Pertwee whined. "Cash business, 'nd I ain't goin' to do no a-different fer anybody."

By then other voices had been dampered to silence, for none had believed that Papa's avarice would ever carry him so far.

"I said, I want a drink," Delaney repeated ominously. "That makes three times I've said it, which is too many."

"But you ain't—"

One of Bart's great hands whipped out and stout fingers fastened in the shirt over Papa's skinny chest. Delaney's face was thrust forward as he drew the sputtering proprietor to him.

"If you ain't got change, this gen'man's been buyin' all night!" shrilled Pertwee with a wild wave toward McIver. "He offered you a drink like a gen'man 'nd you a-didn't take it 'nd now you want me to—"

"Who buys my whisky is my business."

"Well somebody's got to pay for it a-when you git it!" Papa yelped.

Those men who had lived with Red Bart only by giving him a wide berth saw rage flood his face. He half lifted the little man with one hand and the other crushed the sorry beard against a wizened throat and Papa's breath retched in a falsetto gurgle.

"Aw, now, Bart—"

This was one of the Dump's bravest, opening a conciliatory protest, and it was Bob McIver who cut him short.

"Don't aw-now that scum!" he said sharply, yanking the peace-maker aside and glaring at him an instant. "He ain't no party to be got peaceable by aw-nowin' from t'night 'til hell freezes." He flung a glance about the silent group. "What's wrong with this town, anyhow? Standin' here an' lettin' a Chiny-eyed Mick pinch daddy's wizen 'til he's clean uncomfortable?"

He nodded vehemently and hitched up his pants and spat and took the half-dozen steps which placed him at the bar's end. He leaned his elbow on the fixture and put his face close to Red Bart's.

"Chum," said McIver and cleared his throat, "I wouldn't do that."

He spoke almost casually and he looked at Papa, whose eyes bulged and whose hands, instead of waving in futile gestures of defense, now fluttered at his sides. Clearly, McIver had only an academic sympathy for the mean little miser, but when he looked back at Red Bart and saw the mad light in that man's eyes, his mood was far from casual.

"Chum," he repeated, rumblingly, "I wouldn't."

The choking hand let Pertwee take a ragged, noisy breath; he began to cry as Red Bart still held him close by the grip on his clothing.

"Why not?" Delaney asked ominously. "Who wants me to stop?"

McIver's first move was deliberate but Delaney's was like lightning. He let Papa go as the stranger surged clear of the corner of the bar and the hand that had done the choking knotted to a fist and drove out to rock the tug-boat man's head. Just his head; his body, though it halted short, was not swayed, but his head snapped backward and blood burst from his mouth.

He looked about dully. "He hit me!" he said. "Hot dam'; he hit me!"

He felt his mouth with finger tips and inspected them, saying again that he had been hit. And then, with no warning at all, he charged and went through the rain of blows until his great arms were about the other's body. He lifted Bart from his feet and swung him about as men stampeded away to make room and drove the small of Delaney's back against the edge of the bar with an impact which stirred the man's voice to a roar of pain and rage.

FOR an instant after that crash the rigidity went from Red Bart and he sagged sideways and McIver relaxed a trifle, just a trifle, enough to let one of Red Bart's hands slide across his stomach and the fingers slipped inside his shirt and when they came out men who had been still drunk a moment before swore sharp, sober oaths as the knife blade glittered.

It made one livid sweep and then remained still, glittering as McIver's hand bound Delaney's wrist and held it full length from his body.

"You pig-stickin' scum!" he cried hoarsely, his whole rage up, then.

Strength matched strength and their breathing sobbed in the silence. Then Red Bart gave. He went down to a knee and struck with his free hand. But McIver did not mind that; he twisted the wrist he held until it cracked and the knife spilled from flexed fingers into his waiting hand.

"You'd knife me, eh?" he panted.

Delaney stayed on his knee, a hand on the floor, tense, ready to pounce or elude. McIver backed to the bar, never taking his eyes from that evil face; his hand holding the knife rose high and as it drove downward the blade hit the pine plank to bury itself a third its length. Then the tugboat captain wrenched and the steel snapped and he tossed the broken knife across the room.

Slowly he wiped his palms on his pants and said, quietly for so loud a man: "Now, red-head, we'll see!"

They did see. A mountain of a man, this McIver, a great hulk of lithe fury and he did terrible things to Red Bart Delaney, who had done so many terrible things to so many men and in the end he lifted Red in his arms, lumbered to the door and dropped his burden on the topmost of the three steps. The limp form thumped down the other two and its last unconscious movement was a smack of a palm as the arm described an arc and slapped it down on the damp, cool earth.

"Well, now," queried McIver as he rolled back into the room, feeling his lip, "did anybody see that scum hit me? He did—An' le's resume."

They all did and the drink was on Papa Pertwee and the only ones in the place who did not find emotional room for amazement at this unprecedented liberality were McIver, who had come to town only that day, and young Thad Chester who slept on the pool-table, a smoking oil-lamp casting a sodden glow over his good-natured face; a face that, about the mouth, now had an expression which spoke of many things, of disillusionment and heart-break and a fund of strength gone sour.

No one noticed it, but the cuckoo clock in Papa Pertwee's saloon had sounded the half after midnight just as Delaney's palm smacked down on the beaten path to the door; and it was tootoodeling its information that two o'clock was dead when the last of Papa's patrons lurched out, not counting, of course, the lad who smiled upward into the darkness from the pool-table.

The proprietor blew out the lamps that had not gone dry, stuffed the contents of the till into his shirt and climbed the stairs to his dusty room overhead. Mr. Chester slept on and after a time all the Dump slept —but one.

Red Bart, face bruised and cut, moving stiffly when he stooped, paddled canoe upstream and cached it under bushes around a point. Next, he stood for a time outside the store, looking and listening. Satisfied as to the repose of the town he went to the rear, raised a window and emerged with a new pack-sack suffed full. This he carried to his canoe, retraced his way, climbed to the hotel room where he had intended to sleep and came down again with a rifle under his arm.

The first birds were twittering then and out on the river a gull cried. The east was brightening and Bart moved slowly down toward the dock.

NOW, looking from his bedroom window above the store, bald-headed Osy Bartlett, the proprietor, observed two things that struck him as significant. The first was that the shadowy figure out there walked with his head thrust far forward from swaying shoulders, and only one man he knew walked in that particular posture. The second was that the man carried a rifle.

To see a resident of the Dump carrying a rifle at dawn was not odd. Deer browsed close to town and people took what they needed. But to see this particular man carrying a rifle made the lone observer pause.

He did not pause long, however, for his wife was up and demanding water and, shivering a bit in the chill dawn, Osy crossed the street to where a flowing well debouched into a hollowed bass-wood log. He filled his bucket as an early teamster drove his horses to the trough.

"Big time, eh?" the teamster asked.

"'At so? How's 'at?"

"Ain't you heard? Red Bart got th' hell beat outen him."

Osy listened and shrugged and began putting two and two together to make a sum greater than four. Then he hurried home and what he had to tell checked his wife's bustle about the stove. Ten minutes later old man Tolman, the cruiser, sat up in bed and listened as closely as Mrs. Bartlett had while the storekeeper told what he had seen and heard.

IT WAS significant of Tolman's standing that the informer went to him rather than Haynes, the superintendent. Haynes was a good business man, but Tolman, the veteran of the bush, knew men and it was a man who knew men who would be needed today.

Tom Tolman was a good man, though old, but he had no fool's notion of his own capacities, nor did he have hope that law, order and perhaps life could be maintained by any unofficial vigilance the Dump could offer. His first destination was the store, to call the sheriff by telephone. He spoke tersely and his admonition was that grave trouble impended and that the officer had best come a-running. Then it was four o'clock and the town was stirring and breakfast was of little consequence because the story ran like word of fire;

Red Bart Delaney is skulking with a gun for the tug-boat man! Red Bart had met his master in a free fight and was about to become a killer!

Quietly old man Tolman went about. He looked into McIver's pilot house and decided he had a margin of time there because the man slept profoundly. He questioned others but none had seen Delaney nor could guess where he might be. Best, he thought, to delay search until the sheriff came.

But at seven the sheriff was not there; men went reluctantly to work. Tolman called the jail again and turned from the telephone with mouth set.

"Afeerd to come?" a bystander asked.

"That's what a country gets," Tolman commented, "by listenin' to politicians instead of a man with bark on!"

HE WENT again to McIver's tug as the sun pushed over the Ontario hills across the broad river and shook the man and sat beside him on the pilot house locker and remarked gravely that Red Bart was likely hiding somewhere with a rifle, that the sheriff had been sent for and that his advice to Mr. McIver was that he stay under cover until either Delaney was definitely located or the law personally represented in the Dump.

McIver yawned and stretched and said he was damned if he'd hide for any Chiny-eyed Mick who went around chokin' old men for a drink of rot-gut. No, to hell with 'em; when he'd slept his sleep he was going about his business and dam'-the man who tried to stop him, friend or otherwise. Women and kids? Sure, he had; a lot of both. He laughed sleepily. But he'd kept his skin whole a good while to take care of 'em and if this party had a crimp in Chester's Dump it was only a sign that they were a bunch of yellow-bellied corn-huskers instead of men and what scared them couldn't scare him a nickel's worth.

"An' it's early," he concluded. "If you want to do me a favor, tell th' cook to fry the meat 'til it'll half-sole boots an' not to sing out until it's ready. It's th' late hours of this burg that's run yellow into your necks. If you'd sleep more an' talk less you wouldn't worry over no Chiny-eyed Mick!"

So Tolman gave that up and waited silently for the sheriff who, he felt in his heart, never had intended to hurry. The sheriff knew Delaney and the sheriff in hedging—if he were hedging—was doing no more, really, than the Dump and other towns had done for a decade. Still—he was the sheriff.

At eight-thirty-five McIver appeared on the dock, hitched his pants, stuffed a chew into his cheek and rolled up toward town to talk business with Haynes. His way, as he neared the shore, was flanked by the tops of alders which grew rank in the marshy soil along the river's edge. He was smiling as he walked, an arrogant, sparkling smile, and his gaze, caught by a movement in the bushes came to rest on a fleck of color.

It was a vivid yellow warbler, perking its head and eying the huge man. He grinned and started to speak a morning greeting to the midget songster as its throat swelled and sweet music poured out.

BUT McIver did not speak. A gun spoke instead; a flat, dull crash. The man on the dock put his foot down sharply without completing the step it had been about to take. He swayed a trifle and lifted a hand to his stomach. The hand fluttered there an instant and then slid down over his belly, over his thigh and, as he bent forward, the heel of it came to rest on his knee propping his torso half erect. He held that posture, a brief, brief moment and then went over on his face. He coughed once and lay very still, queerly flattened on the planks for so large a man.

A wisp of blue vapor floated over the top of a bush and the warbler, his music having been cut off so abruptly by the shot, shook himself, hopped to another twig and looked about. He sang again, the notes loud in the silence.

Up the street a woman screamed after that instant's pause and men started running. But they stopped in their tracks when Red Bart emerged from the alders.

His face was white, in strange contrast to the red beard stubble on his chin. He looked up the street and jerked the butt of the rifle to his hip, sweeping the town. He sidestepped across the shore end of the dock, never looking at the motionless figure behind him and when he was beyond the clump of alders on the far side he began running along the reedy bank of the river, running half sideways with his face turned over his shoulder to watch for pursuit.

They did not run after him. They ran to McIver and found him dead and consternation over the anticipated tragedy prevailed until some one discerned a canoe far out on the river. It had kept the screen of the long point for a time and its occupant had been able to put much water between him and the Dump before revealing his whereabouts. It must be Delaney, men thought, and hurried to McIver's tug to give chase but the engineer had been repacking his steam-pipe and the boiler was cold so that was hopeless. There was considerable talk of pursuing in other canoes but it came to nothing because the man they wanted was Red Bart Delaney, who had been bad enough to cow them before, but who now had become a killer.

It was noon when the sheriff drove into town with a deal of bluster. But he quieted oddly when he looked into Tom Tolman's face and when the cruiser told him that the next best move would be to telephone the provincial police of Ontario to head off his man he agreed. But he went on taking notes in a little book and did not telephone and Tolman went home in disgust.

CHAPTER III

McIVER was dead, Red Bart was gone. The first hysterical flush of excitement had subsided and Chester's Dump was mostly at dinner when young Thad stirred on the spotty pool-table and wrinkled his face and opened his mouth and moaned.

He sat up and with eyes squeezed shut clung to the edge of the table. After steadying himself he blinked and looked about. Four men were at the bar talking earnestly. Through the open double doors in the front streamed the splendid sunshine of June.

Thad swung his feet over the rail and was about to drop gingerly to the floor when a figure emerged from the store across the way.

It was the figure of a girl, lissom, small, clad in the faintest of blue frocks, dangling by its string a wide, floppy hat and the sunlight fell on hair the color of spun gold. She came into the street with all the lightness of a bit of drifting down and walked away with the grace of a sprite. He watched her go out of his range of vision. Then he opened his mouth as though to speak, dropped to the floor and took a half-dozen quick strides forward.

For the moment he was all determination but as he neared the doorway his decisiveness ebbed sharply. He stopped and put out a hand to the bar and the other rested over his eyes as though to shield them from a blinding light. When he lowered it he saw himself in the dusty, bubbly mirror on the wall and his smile was dark. He made a wry, hopeless grimace at that reflection because he was seeing, in a dulled, foggy manner, the contrast between its dark visage and the fine lightness of the figure he had watched across the street.

Papa Pertwee was on his knees under the bar, filling a demijohn from a spigot.

The men spoke to Thad more elaborately than they would have greeted one another, with deference and something that smacked of patronage, and went on with their earnest talk. For an interval none of it registered on the consciousness of Thad Chester and then words came:

"—— undertaker ought to be here by now."

Undertaker, that connoted death.

"Who's dead?"

The faces turned to him again; even Papa Pertwee's, popping up above the level of the bar and disappearing with a rattling sound from his throat.

"Dead? Who? My ——, ain't you heerd?"

"No—I've been—" He felt a sweep of self-consciousness as he started to explain why he was not abreast of the Dump's news but that faded out.

"McIver— Th' tug-boat—"

"Red Bart's fin'ly done it," another broke in and then all four talked at once, contributing concurrently some thrilling morsel of the striking event and young Chester stood frowning, trying to realize that his was not the only tragedy enacted in the town. They edged closer and their interruptions became more frequent as memories brought up new detail, but somehow the boy was not much impressed.

What they related did affect him, in a way. The atmosphere of another tragedy darkened the sun, added to young Mr. Chester's giddiness—either that or the liquor of yesterday and the day before and the weeks before that— Death! He shuddered.

Papa Pertwee corked the demijohn, wiped his hands on his stained shirt front, set a glass before Thad and thumped the bottle on the bar.

The young man stood staring into the street, brows drawn into a deep frown. He had ceased listening— A man shot dead, yonder in that sunshine.

Papa spoke. "Here's your mornin's mornin'."

Thad drew his great, lax shoulders up slowly but did not look at him.

One of the others took the bottle and poured a drink and the rest did likewise, leaving it at the far end of the line. Pertwee collected their change, shuffled along the bar, retrieved the bottle, slid it out to where it would touch the back of Thad's hand and wheezed again:

"Here's your mornin's mornin', sonny."

Thad looked at him, and Papa smiled a toothless cunning smile. He always smiled at Thad Chester because Thad Chester's allowance was by far the largest single item that passed across his bar. But now instead of bowing with grave courtliness as he usually did, instead of smiling his weak, habitual smile, his best customer looked right through Mr. Pertwee and when the cuckoo popped out of its cote and tootoodelooed the half after twelve as it had an even dozen hours ago when Red Bart came to ignominious rest outside, Thad started as if struck.

"No thank you," he said and moved away.

Papa was startled.

"What's th' matter?" he squawked.

Thad shook his head. "Nothing," he said, frowning at the bottle and wiping his hot, parched lips. "Nothing, Mr. Pertwee; nothing at all."

BUT, of course, much was the matter. He was confused, but for months, now, he had been confused on waking; he was depressed today, conflicting emotions were surging within him; he had been shocked by the tale of McIver's death. But confusion, depression, shock—none of these mattered much, because he had had a vision of lovely life, swinging a straw hat, and he knew that he had failed in another thing he had started out to do; he had sought to drown despair over one failure in Papa's liquor and had not only failed to achieve forgetfulness but had made matters worse—much worse.

His lips, his throat, his raw nerves, screamed for whisky, but he would not let them have whisky. The self deep in him revolted from it and chastized the body by saying that no whisky was to be its portion that day—not until he had tried once again!

He started out and Papa Pertwee, beard sagging at this disaster of his commerce, bent forward. As Thad reached the doorway the old man croaked:

"Ain't you going to a-settle, young man?"

The boy stopped and turned unsteadily.

"What's that, Mr. Pertwee?"

"Ain't you a-goin' to settle?" he repeated in his cracked whine.

"Do I owe you something? I—I didn't recall—"

He fished in his pocket and Papa's eyes glittered with avarice.

"I don't aim to take lodgers," he said. "No more do I aim to keep pool players waitin'. You be'n sleepin' twelve hours on my table an' that's worth a-suthin'."

No amazement showed in Thad's face; no humor or resentment, either. He was preoccupied as he walked back to the bar, fumbling in his pocket.

"I'd a-ought to charge city," Papa wheezed. "'N Detroit they gits fifty cents a hour for pool-tables, but I don't a-want to be called niggardly."

Thad found a crumpled bill and tossed it to the bar.

"And have a drink," he said abstractedly as he turned away.

CHAPTER IV

SO BILLIE COMPTON was back! That amazing fact was the one thing which clung clearly in his mind, resting against a jumbled background of subordinate thoughts, of failure, and dismay and death, a confused, fuzzy background.

It was there in his mind, a burning burden, when he left the saloon. It was there when he came up from his long dive in the biting waters of the river. It was there, and reflected in his eyes, as he bent to the broken mirror and shaved with trembling hands. It goaded him as he dressed and impelled him later up the one street of the town, clean, shaven, hatless, walking slowly and heedlessly past the group of men clustered about the sheriff and about old Tom Tolman.

Billie Compton was back, back in the house of her uncle, Haynes, and that fact relegated murder to a secondary place in the boy's fogged mind.

He had believed, up to that moment of waking on Pertwee's pool-table, that he had forgotten, thought he had drowned memory of her, desire for her in Papa's poison; but she had come back and demonstrated to him that the frittering of his strength and his self-respect had been only waste. And he was going to her, a moth again to the flame; a singed moth, after two years up here in the North, where his roaring old father had sent him to learn to be a man.

He grimaced at that. He knew what his father's idea amounted to. He knew what his father had been striving at, for the elder Chester was of that school of rich men who had had nothing but vision and vitality with which to fashion beginnings. He wanted his son to have the experience of that same hard school. Perhaps doing what was called a man's work for a wage proved something, but young Thad had doubted it from the beginning.

Still, he tolerantly put himself into the process and did what any employee was expected to do. But would that make a man? He had no lack of woolens; he had no broken rubbers, no ragged mittens; no wife and children dependent on his meager wage, no indefinite future of such toil, even. He had youth and strength, agility and a zest for action and behind him was his father, beyond him the Chester millions. Tolman, he knew, had written to his father that the man was emerging from the youth. He had gone up the Zhing-wauk with the cruiser to look over that Ontario pulp stuff and had acquitted himself well and his guide had smiled and said that he was coming along.

But what makes a man? Hardships? Physical courage? He had tried what these men called hardships and found it play; he had a reputation for being unafraid in woods and on river, but when Billie Compton came, what had these mattered?

Billie Compton, with her blue eyes and gentle voice! She had snared his heart as easily as he, on the boom, sent logs to their berths with his pike pole. She had taken his assurance, his balance; she had made him plead when he wanted to be masterly; she had made him feel like weeping when he knew that strategy demanded laughter. She had made a fool of him in his own eyes and he had not the manhood to help himself.

It was memory of her teasing laughter that would not let him sleep sober; memory of her slim arms slipping through his hands that drove him to Papa Pertwee's. It was Billie Compton, the flirt, who had made him quit trying to be a man and sell his soul on the assumption that he could have peace.

And he had not achieved the forgetfulness which meant peace! He had tried since

Fall to drink himself to indifference and had renounced drink today only that he might be fit to go to her again. Failing now, though, what would be left? He did not know. He had come up here to learn to be a man and was going to her again, like a singed moth to the flame.

"Billie!"

His voice crackled strangely as she emerged from the cool shadows of the wide living-room in response to his ring.

"Dear old Thad!"

He wanted to be reserved. He wanted to come this afternoon with an air of casualness and yet he had called her name in a voice that broke like a small boy's and when she spoke he felt his knees tremble!

"Dear, dear old Thad!" She was in knickers, now, and a low-necked blouse. She was offering her hand, the cool, slender, pink-and-white hand, and he was telling himself that he *must* appear indifferent and yet with that hand in his he lurched forward with a moan and she was back in the room, with those devils of triumph dancing in her eyes and breaking his heart.

AFTER that he sat down and talked a bit. Billie prattled on, about her winter in the East, about this prom, that dinner; about Tom and Dick and Harry, and her words were like fine blades in his heart and she watched him and knew this and gorged herself with his suffering.

Then she came about. She was prim, grave.

"But they've told me, dear Thad," she said just above a whisper. "They've told me about you. Why; why must you throw yourself away?"

He laughed bitterly and for once she was startled and in doubt, but he did not see that. Failure danced before him and he paced the room while she watched with something like alarm. Things were clear, now, blindingly clear to his singing nerves. It was as though he had finally shaken off that fog.

Adroitly, the girl nipped the talk and led it off.

"That terrible Delaney!" she murmured. "And uncle says they'll never get him, now!"

He was glad of respite, of letting her talk of another tragedy than his and listened while she told.

The crew of a tug-boat which had been across the river at dawn and had docked at the Dump at high noon reported seeing Red Bart driving his canoe straight for the mouth of Zhing-wauk. The sheriff was afraid to follow, had made only the feeblest pretense of searching the river. No other would go, if the sheriff would not, and who could blame them? It was a man's job, her uncle had said; a man would take his life in his hands by following Red Bart. Besides, what good would it do, now, with the start he had and the sort of man he was known to be on trail and river?

"Oh, it would take a man to get Red Bart!" she said. "A man—a man's man. A man like you might be, dear Thad, if you'd let drink alone!"

So she had tired of that other tragedy and was back at him, toying with his emotions, experimenting to see what a girl can do with a man's heart!

He was filled with pain and held himself quiet as he listened. He wanted to beat his breast and scream out but instead he sat quietly, slouched in a chair and his burning eyes devoured her from the tips of her little pacs to the crown of her yellow head. He was dizzy again shortly; the fog close in after that interval of clarity. At times her voice, even, floated away and when he spoke he scarcely knew what he said, but all the time he was acutely aware of her loveliness, his great desire for her.

And that want swelled his chest like a bursting breath until he fell on his knees before her, reaching for the hands which she drew away. She told him he must not, that he did not know what he was saying.

"You don't realize, Thad dear, what you're doing!"

Oh, good God, didn't he? Didn't he know he was a fool, to grovel at her feet? Didn't he know he was a weakling? Didn't he know that this was wholly the wrong move to make? But what could he do, when he was no man and she tortured him so?

Yes, what? And he dropped his face into her lap and clasped his hands over his head and begged her brokenly, abjectly, like a fool, to love him, to tolerate him, to help him prove himself worthy of her love.

"Prove?" And now her voice was sharp with ascendency. "Prove fitness, Thad? What have you done to prove fitness since I went away? . . . Ugh!"

Her disgust gave him a modicum of control. He slumped back on one hip, hands lax on the rug and lifted his eyes to see the scorn on her face and bowed his head in humiliation again.

"You come to me and talk of love!" she went on, a malicious smile quirking her mouth, the smile of cruel maidenhood, tasting the sweets of petty power. "And after the stories I've heard of you! What have you done to win a girl's love? What *can* you do to prove worthiness?"

"Tell me!" Ah, there was a challenge at last and his head shot up as he flung it desperately at her. "*You* tell me what it is, Billie!"

THAT silenced her and for a moment her eyes were confused before the cunning lights began to dance in them.

"That's what I've wanted to know: what does a man do to make a girl like you know he loves her?" He gripped his chest in that terrible, humorless earnestness of youth. "You've accused me. I *am* guilty of a lot. But now, what's your answer? What would prove to you I'm fit?"

Ah, young Thad! Today, with death and tragedy and turmoil heavy on the town, and you talk so to such a child!

"A man," she began breathlessly, "must have those things which all women admire: strength of body, strength of mind; courage, high courage, Thad! He must do and dare and not only for her but for all who know them, for all who might ever come to know them! He must be a heroic figure; his name must be on every man's lips. He must—"

She laid the tip of a manicured finger on her own delectable lips while he watched her. She closed her eyes to think and he could hear her breath catch.

"Such a man as might have manner and breeding: gentleness, poise. And yet such a man as might have the courage to do what even these strong men of our North are afraid to do—afraid to do today—"

She leaned forward, hands in her lap, her lovely hands which held his heart so closely— He moved his lips but no words came. Still, the query in his eyes was beyond mistaking and she nodded slowly.

"It would wipe it all out," she said in that low, low voice. "It would erase the past, absolve all shame. It would make you a man among men to bring Red Bart back to justice."

He lurched to his feet.

"YOU mean that?" he cried sharply, intently, though the conscious part of him seemed to be standing far off, only watching. "You mean that if I should bring him back you'd—you'd—Billie?"

Her palms held her cheeks, now, in counterfeit distress and indecision.

"Yes," she breathed finally. "It would be a proper test. It would—"

"You'd love me, Billie? You'd let me love you? You'd be kind and not drive me away? You'd not laugh at me and hurt and—and devil me? You'd not tease me, you'd be sweet and kind and—and—Billie?"

He bent close to her for she was standing now, and his knuckles drummed one another in a ferment of excitement. She closed her eyes and let her head rock backward.

"Any girl can love any man who—proves himself," she breathed.

And then, gallant gesture, he had her hand and was kissing it and muttering that he could, that he would, that doing the thing no other man on the river would dare do was little enough to show her the mettle that would hold love.

All in a fog, this, in that detached sort of suffering he underwent today. Yesterday's whisky? Turmoil of chagrin? Suddenly born hope? Ah, he did not know the reason for his confusion. He moved in a dream, a dream of excitement, and promised the thing hysterically and was gone while Billie watched him swing down the street, small triumph in her wide blue eyes.

CHAPTER V

TOM TOLMAN was telling it to the sheriff and a cluster of men listened, torn between awe for his temerity and delight at the other's discomfort.

"You ain't even telephoned acrost, yet!" accused the old man.

"Seems to me, Tolman, that this is official business an' you're goin'—"

"Seems to me, Sheriff, it's public business. We call you to stop a killin' and you don't deliver. You get here finally and we know to th' very river where th' man's gone and you let him get hours an' hours of start!"

"You're just guessing at where he's gone. He might come back—"

"Come back!" the old woodsman's scorn was bitter. "You know better! And as for guessin', it's a good one. He knows he can't come back but he knows the North.

He'll get over th' height of land an' down toward th' Bay an' he'll hole up there an' nobody'll be wiser. Except us, here, who'll know how to vote on a sheriff again!"

"Now don't go too far!"

"I can't. I can't go too far after what's been left undone here today." Tolman started away but turned back sharply. For a moment he eyed the sheriff sternly and then spoke. "Mebby I've said enough, but I'll go further. I'll leave you nothin' to fall back on. I know that country like—like you know votin' places in this county an' I'll tell you where to look.

"He's gone up the Zhing-wauk. He'll make th' head of th' lake tonight an' likely camp there. He's decided on that river an' can't quit it. Tomorrow night he'll be at th' mouth of th' Wolf. Next day he'll make through Windigo Valley an' camp at Thirty Mile rapid. That's three days"—checking them off on the fingers of a hand raised in accusing posture. "Fourth day he'll make th' big beaver meadow if he don't find too much down stuff an' next day if he goes hard—an he can—he'll come to th' old cabin.

"That's my guess about his program an' even with th' moon he can't go much faster. After that it's a wild guess. He'll have to cross th' railroad an' once over that he's only a two-mile carry to Pike Lake an' then it's down-stream clean to th' Bay.

"There's two things to do. Have th' Canady officers come down or go up yourself. You can't miss him, if you've got th' sand to try not to."

The sheriff laughed uncomfortably.

"You've done a lot of guessin', Tolman. It don't sound reasonable to me but if you think it is, why don't you go after him yourself?"

The cruiser's scorn was withering.

"I'm no officer, an—"

"I'll make you one!"

Tolman waved a dignified gesture. "An' I'm an old man," he added with a tinge of sorrow. "Was I packin' a few less years, I'd go. I'd go, Sheriff, an' these men know that ain't hot air."

"Hell!" remarked the other and spat.

HE LOOKED around, but saw only hostility in those faces. He did not see the puzzlement on one, on young Thad Chester's. He saw only that which he feared but knew he would find: enmity, scorn. They knew he feared to follow Delaney. They knew, too, that he had not called to Canada for help because that would entail the responsibility of bringing the man home from the point of detention. Surely, had they charity those men would have sympathized because Red Bart, even captured by others, would be no docile prisoner to handle. He would fight, now, with all the ingenuity the devil had given him, but this man was sheriff of the county, committed to face danger, and so they scorned him.

"And if any of you," he said, "think there's enough in Tolman's guess to warrant tryin' it, I'll deputize you, for what good it'll do, across yonder. Why—I tell you, he's hid out somewheres now and it'd be like lookin' for a needle in a haystack, but if any of you—"

A movement in the group cut him off.

"I'd like to try, Sheriff."

That was young Thad and mutters of amazement followed the silence. Then, close after them, a chuckle or two and a disgusted oath. This boy, this drunken bum—in such a moment, in such a circumstance!

The sheriff gawped.

"I'd like to give it a try," the lad went on, trying to hold his voice steady. Things swam before him: the sheriff's loose jaw, those sneering faces; trees and things. His own voice sounded faintly because his ears still rang with the low music of Billie Compton's words, holding out precious hope.

"You mean that, son? You want to go get Red Bart?" The sheriff grinned and winked at the others. Ho, he thought, this *is* one on the crowd! The only one among them who would do the thing they were riding him for not doing was old man Chester's drunken bum of a son! This was revenge of a sort; this would give him one laugh, anyhow! "All right, then, young man. I've got a badge in my car. You're a deputy now—and good luck to you!"

He moved toward his automobile and Thad followed. No other did, but grunts did and derisive laughter and these penetrated the mist that shut Thad Chester out of reality. No more fawning, now, no gestures of respect for the son of the push. He had made a play and he understood that what they had really thought of him all along was welling to the surface to find expression and a wave of anger surged through him. He was being derided, he was being proclaimed a joke, he was being laughed at!

Little they knew! Little they knew the high purpose in his heart, half smothered by that fog in his mind. He gritted his teeth, he turned, with the badge in his hand and the sheriff's taunt in his ears, looking for Tolman. Tolman would not laugh at him; Tolman had said once he was getting to be a man. But Tolman had gone and Thad put a hand over his eyes, striving for a moment of clear thought.

No one understood; no one could understand; they did not understand and they were sneering at him because none of them had the courage to do this thing he was about to do.

Savagely, then, he prepared, while the sheriff pompously telephoned and the line formed at Pertwee's bar. None gave him heed and, as it was supper time when he shoved off, none saw him until he was far out, light pack-sack in the bow, paddling toward the fading eastern sky, toward Ontario and the mouth of the Zhing-wauk, up which Bart Delaney had fled.

The cool wind was good on his hot, bare head and drove some of the fog from his mind but even yet he was in that half daze and once caught himself grinning good-naturedly, blankly. He straightened and dipped the paddle deeper.

CHAPTER VI

"BLESSED if th' fool kid didn't make a start!"

"Blessed if he didn't!"

This, the ingenuous exchange of the two tug-boat men as they stood on deck and watched the distant fleck through a marine glass.

"Well, he'll sober up and be back when Papa opens tomorrow," the first predicted.

That was what others said when the gossip reached Papa Pertwee's. The kid would be back and plastered by noon.

The gossip drifted to the store and people carried it from there hither and yon and before long the tale of a fool's quest reached Haynes and when Haynes told his niece Billie chirruped that she was thrilled to death.

"Yes, and he'll be somethinged to death, too, unless he comes back," her uncle said sourly and rattled his newspaper. After a bit he got out of his chair and stamped his feet and said that if he thought the young fool would *not* turn back he'd sent after him. "But then," he added, "it's only a drunken whim."

He dropped his concern with this assuring reasoning but Billie Compton did not. She became grave and took a worry to bed and slept fitfully and as the night aged a sense of responsibility came to her. It was a fresh experience for the girl and at dawn she was cowering by her window looking out at the smoky river, at the ragged banners of light breaking through strips of eastern clouds.

After a bit she rose and dressed and went white faced through the town to the tar paper shack that Thad Chester had called home.

She called his name gently; and again: "Thad? Thad!" She rapped on the door and it swung creakingly open.

The one room was empty, in bad disarray. The clothes he had worn yesterday were dumped on a backless chair and when she saw these and felt the bedding to find it cold (she was not the daughter of a woodsman for nothing) she let a low whimper slip through her thin lips.

She ran out and along the beach to another shanty and rapped feverishly.

"Uncle Tom! Uncle Tom!" she cried.

Inside, a cough and a startled grunt.

"Yes, Billie? What's up?"

"Let me in, uncle; oh, let me in!"

"Just a minute, now; just a mite of a minute!"

She heard his bare feet on the floor, heard him moving and in a moment he appeared in the doorway, drawing his suspenders over his shirt, sleep in his clear old eyes, gray hair bristling.

"Whatever brings you down here?"

"Oh, Uncle Tom it's— It's Thad! He went!"

"Went? Went? Went where, Billie?"

Tears were on her lashes now, and honest tears. She could not speak at once and gestured to the east where the dawn flushed.

"He went after Delaney and I—I sent him—"

Old Tolman drew a deep breath.

"Oh, so he started, did he? Well—well—come in, sister; come in here and let's get this over."

She sat weakly in an old rocker, knuckles at her lips.

"Now, don't you go frettin' about him, sister. I mind now, that he made some fool play to the sheriff yesterday. I didn't pay no attention, 'cause I was quite hot then. But if he really started out, I didn't know it. I sorta set here last evenin' an' cooled off, so I didn't know. But if he did start he'll be back. He— He ain't never finished anything."

"Oh, but you don't understand!" she cried at that. "He—it's different, Uncle Tom—I know he's never finished anything but—but this is—oh, I'm frightened; I'm wretched!"

Her distress took away some of the old man's casualness and he frowned.

"Now, let's take it easy an' get this straight. You say you sent him?"

SHE nodded and looked away. "He came up yesterday afternoon and started talking as he used to talk, as—oh, you know: he's made love to me."

"Yeah. Most of us knows; an' you wouldn't have him an' he—he got upsot about it."

"Yes. But yesterday he was different. He asked me what he could do to show he was the sort of man worthy of a girl. What he could do to make me love him. And I told him that if he would bring Red Bart back it would prove— Oh, I was a fool! I never thought he'd go! I thought it was—was smart to use the power I had over him, but—"

She did not finish. Her eyes wet with misery, went to Tolman's.

"An' he took you up."

"Yes; yes! He took me up and father says—"

But she could not go on. Realization of what she might have done overwhelmed her again. She was no longer the coquette, the flirt. She was face to face with potential tragedy and should that tragedy come she would be responsible for it and that thought was more than she could handily bear.

Old Tolman said nothing but he reached for his socks, laid out carefully over the tops of his pacs, and began drawing them on.

"'Course, chances are he's on his way back now; ashamed an' regretful-like, but if he shouldn't be—"

He did not finish and the alacrity with which he dressed his feet bespoke the seriousness with which he considered the alternative. The girl checked her weeping.

"You will help me? We'll go after him, Uncle Tom?"

"I will. I'll get somebody to go along. It'll be no place for a girl like—"

"But I must go! Don't you see, I'm to blame? I sent him after that ruthless man and put him in danger? Don't you see I've got to undo what I did? And I can paddle! Why, you've said many times that I was as good as any boy in the woods and—"

"Not now, sister. This is no campin' trip. This may be—"

Again he left the thing he had started to say half finished but the girl was on her feet.

"I will go!" she cried. "Do you think I can let myself start a thing like this and then not lift a hand to stop it? No, Uncle Tom, I'm going with you. Two can go up the river faster than he can. We must! We must go fast and hard and long until we find him—"

"You're goin' loony, now, sister, you—"

"I never was so sane or sensible in my life! I grew up last night, uncle. I'm going"—with a mature decisiveness that made the old man shrug helplessly.

CHAPTER VII

AT DAWN young Thad Chester opened his eyes slowly. He was cold. His hips ached from the chill and the hardness of the sand on which he had spread his blanket. Ashes of the midget fire he had built in the moonlight to boil his kettle were gone, whirled away by the night wind. His canoe, bottom up, rested on the beach at the foot of Zhing-wauk Lake and as he lay there the morning breeze, sweeping through the wide band of rushes in the water, sounded a mellow, mournful organ note.

He sat up with a start and for a moment remained so, propped erect by his hands spread behind him. Then he lifted one hand to his queer feeling head. He shook that head and blinked but the feeling would not depart. The call of a pileated woodpecker came sharp and clear to his ears and he looked about expecting to see the bird close at hand. He had not heard a sound so distinctly in a long time.

He rose, mystified, started a fire and kicked off his pants. Stripped, he stood on a rock and eyed the clear water beneath him. Then he went in a long, angling dive and came up blowing mightily. He stood with his back to the blaze while goose pimples flecked his pink and white skin. Yonder, the horizon was sharp; sharper than he remembered horizons were. The water was a tender, bright blue, too, under the light breeze. A raven flew over him and he remarked the gloss to the feathers. The smell of dry spruce burning at his feet was sharp and acrid in his nostrils. Such a distinct odor.

He drew a deep breath and an odd smile crept over his countenance.

"Under Heaven, I'm sober!" he muttered and slowly began to dress.

But before he commenced to lace his pacs that smile was gone; wholly gone, and a frown was between his brows. It was not from the dull and growing headache, not from the sore muscles, strained by yesterday's and last evening's paddling. It was a frown for folly done and he stopped all activity and let his hands go limp while he stared darkly out across the bright lake.

So he had committed himself to this fool thing, had he? He had come here on the trail of Red Bart Delaney single handed! He grinned a sickly grin. He had made a fool of himself— For Billie! (His breath caught.) He had done it for her, yes. Oh, what a fool, what a fool!

It was downright boyish; childish. Any man, alone, against Red Bart when the only man to whip him in a decade had paid for it with his life! He laughed aloud at himself. Why, he had not even a gun; he had come unarmed. He rose and moved to the pack-sack lying on a boulder, opened it and looked at the scanty supply of food he had brought and laughed again. For a long interval he stood erect, thinking.

Go back? That would be humiliating, with memory of the scornful laughter he had heard yesterday ringing in his ears. Go back? When he had tried for months to drown memory of Billie Compton and when the ordeal she had laid out for him yesterday had fired him with this foolhardy ambition which, he well knew, was the last try he could make to win her favor? Go back? And admit once and and for all that he had failed to make a man of himself after Tolman had tried and had failed?

He shrugged and shook his head savagely.

But go on? With Red Bart Delaney, the killer, beyond him ready to kill again to keep his freedom? But go on? Empty handed, poorly equipped, into a wilderness scarcely touched by man? Go on? Risk throwing his life away in an errand that none other in all the country would undertake?

Still, as he stood there he saw himself clearly for perhaps the first time in his life. He was distinguished for two things: for the accident of birth which made him the son of a rich man and for his worthlessness, his uselessness and, marking this, a feeling of revulsion swept him. He was sober now; he had perspective on himself. He had frittered the finest period of his young manhood, he had smirched his name and his father's name; he was a joke to Chester's Dump, to his family and to the girl whose elusive charm had beset him. And he did not want to be a joke!

Oh, he could hear the Dump, he could see the Dump, should he go sneaking back! The I-told-you-sos would pop from every lip. They had laughed at him yesterday and now they would be restless, wondering if they might have been wrong about him, worrying for fear they might have laughed too soon, and the bitterness engendered by this doubt would be pronounced should he go back and prove them right after giving cause for uneasiness.

Youth can stand scorn, youth can bear pity, but youth cannot put up so easily with laughter. Youth is serious-minded, youth is bothered by various complexes, youth must believe itself considered with gravity. Go back, this youth, and see their cruel grins, hear their bucolic snickering? Go back and suffer these?

No, the die was cast! A fool's errand, pregnant with all manner of tragic possibilities, and yet he felt that if he turned back now he could never again hold his head erect, face Tolman or his father or the men who labored for his father, or Billie Compton.

HE SLAPPED bacon into the pan, chucked a tin bucket into the flames and brewed strong tea. He bolted the food inelegantly, his eyes on the upper lake, watching for a tell-tale thread of smoke, repeating again and again to himself what he had heard Tolman tell the sheriff about his guess as to Delaney's course, for he knew that none was wiser to the ways of men and the nature of rivers than the cruiser.

He kicked the brands of fire into the water, shoved off and, dark hair blown back by the morning breeze, set out doggedly.

It is fifteen miles from end to end of Zhing-wauk Lake, four hard hours for an able boatman, but today Thad Chester was sober for the first time in months. His head was like to burst, stomach wry with his breakfast; he ached from skull to soles and despite the breeze he sweat as he made mediocre progress. He sweat and fought pain and sickness because he did not want to be laughed at and because Billie Compton had said what she said. He sweat and ground his teeth and told himself he'd show them all. But the important factor was that he sweat! It worked the stiffness out of his muscles, it relieved the nausea and though his head was torment, poison was draining out and blood was pumping clean strength to an abused body.

With the sun riding high overhead he reached the end of that phase of his journey and beached on the sand flat where any man would camp should he elect to sleep at the head of the lake. But no man had camped there. A doe and twin fawns had come down to drink yesterday, leaving their tracks sharp in the golden sand; a heron had stalked there, but no canoe had been dragged, no human foot had stepped, no fire had been built since the last rain, and rain had not come for a fortnight.

Thad looked about at the hills. Surely, no man would leave the river and try escape across that rugged country. If the trail were blind, his best guess was to push on—and Tolman had been sure— So he shoved off again, conscious of weariness and a burning throat and made his way up the placid, winding stream.

He had not been gone an hour before he was rewarded. A spruce tree had fallen across a riffle, and when he stepped into the water to lift his canoe over he stopped with a little cry of exultation.

Those branches had been broken and the exposed wood was fresh and as he looked he saw the faint outlines of a man's footprint in the clay bottom.

True, it might have been a far-ranging sportsman, a prospector, a land-looker who had lifted his canoe over that down tree, but some one had gone this way yesterday and Red Bart had started this way!

And, mere minutes later, watching the bank as he traveled, he saw man tracks again and found where a canoe had been dragged out, where a rifle-butt had rested in the moist earth and where a tiny fire had been built. It was such a small blaze, so well screened, would send up so little smoke! And no man with an open mission would have built such a fire last night because the hours of darkness were cold!

So Red Bart had accepted the Zhing-wauk as his readiest means of escape and had camped here last night. He had gone farther by an hour's journey than Tolman believed he would and he had exercised great caution.

CHAPTER VIII

NEARLY a day behind, then, was young Thad Chester, and he bent to his task with new vigor though wearied muscles, unaccustomed these many months to such a strain, rebelled.

He reached the foot of a long riffle and, track line over his shoulder, went upstream at a trot, throwing great fronds of water before him. He had been up and down this stream once, when he and Tolman cruised the Ontario purchase. He tried to remember things about it, distances, the location of Wolf River, where the cruiser had guessed Delaney would camp after his second day, but could not. He toiled on after the sun had gone, until he could take not so much as one more stroke of the paddle, until he could drag the canoe no more by its track line, but he did not reach the tributary.

He thought sleep would come but it did not. When he spread his blankets and looked up at the peaceful stars above the spruce tips he was conscious of a decided ache in his throat, the singing of his nerves and stood up, frightened. He wanted whisky! He had been wanting whisky all day and had not been aware of it. Now, with the excitement of strenuous travel broken the need asserted itself. His lips were dry, head hot and his eyes burned. He felt himself trembling in a fit of weakness and moaned aloud.

A tempting devil rose in him. "Turn back," it cried. "Turn back; this is a fool's errand! Death, perhaps waits at the end, even though you can stand the going and overtake your man. You are handicapped, you have no chance; even if something less than death awaits, surely humiliation is at the end of the trail! So turn back! You need never see the Dump again, you need never face sneering laughter. Leave the country; you've failed here. Find another place and make the fight for yourself there—get back to whisky again—just for a night, a week—taper off. You can't let it go suddenly—not this way."

Again the romantic bent of youth came to his rescue and, just as he had dropped to his knees to fold his blanket, declaring that he *would* turn back, that if he were to make a fool of himself it would be in a congenial manner, he fancied he heard once more Billie Compton's silken voice, felt again the smooth taper of her arms, touched, once more, his lips to her cool fingers.

"Oh, God," he moaned, lifting his face, "help me! Help me over tonight and I'm on top of it!"

He paced the narrow shelf on which he had camped; he built a fire and made strong tea and when dawn came he stripped himself and dived into the pool below his camping place and came up growling to himself that need of whisky couldn't turn him back!

HE WAS on the river before it was well light and before noon had passed the mouth of the Wolf. However, none had camped there, no sign was left that he could read and it was not until he reached the first portage that he knew a man still pushed ahead of him.

He saw where that man had landed, where he had gone and come and gone again. One trip for the pack, one for the canoe; and on one of those trips the man had run where going permitted speed. No fisherman, no prospector left that sign; it was left by some one in desperate haste.

So now, he reasoned with a great surge of accomplishment, completion of his errand lay first in speed, secondly, in craft. Once close on Red Bart he would lay his plan, but the initial requisite was speed.

He pushed on, well into evening again, though his body was tortured with outraged muscles and fatigue. His face was drawn and haggard, hands unsteady, but that night he slept. The devil of temptation rose again but he put it back firmly, atremble inside, and knew that once and for all he need never again be called a drunkard!

He had chopped down a small dead spruce because firewood was not handy, but his mind had been so occupied with himself and his triumph over that self that he gave no heed to the phenomenal echoes which rang from his blade. Nor did he realize until morning that he had entered the part of the stream known as Windigo Valley.

Tolman had told him of it last year, of how old Indians refused to enter that part of the river and of how, when the wind was right, the moaning of ship whistles bound to and from Lake Superior sometimes penetrated to the upper end of the gorge, sound vibrations sucked up between the hills for miles with wonderful clarity.

No, he did not recall this. He had won one fight; he was closing in for another and he knew that tonight he must sleep to restore his strength.

And he did sleep, the heavy slumber of exhaustion, and while he slept, far upstream a man sat in the moonlight, smoking a pipe, frowning, listening. The blows of Thad's ax had come to Red Bart while he cooked his evening meal as distinctly as though they originated just below the bend. But he knew the river, knew the deceptive acoustic qualities of the valley, and had no fear that whoever had swung that ax was within miles.

In fact, after the moon was high, Delaney packed his outfit, shoved off his canoe and floated silently *downstream*. He stood up now and then and looked at the faintly lighted country on either side and after a time stopped and went ashore. He felt of the brush and found it drenched with dew, but he explored until he found a dead balsam and from it he broke a great pile of brittle branches. He crossed the river and gathered more, brash, dry brush. Then, for a time, he dozed, sitting against a stump, blanket drawn about his shoulders.

And down at the mouth of the Wolf two more people slept beside the tumbling Zhingwauk—slept after the one had reached out to touch the blanketed shoulder of the other and said lowly:

"'S all right, sister. Mournin', now, won't do any good. It's up to us to go fast an' hard an' stop him an' cryin' won't make miles for us."

CHAPTER IX

SMOKE wakened Thad Chester. He started up sharply. The sun was above the hills to the eastward. He had slept late, hours late, and now smoke was in his nostrils!

He leaped out of his blankets and stared around him and the odor was so pungent that his heart raced. Another camp? His man, close as this? Then his eyes swept the horizon and high up, borne along by the brisk breeze, he saw a faint streamer of dun against the immaculate sky. No; no campfire, that. But it was fire, surely enough, a fire running in the forest!

Thad had been enough in the woods to know the terror of that. Fire at any time is enough to stir the apprehension of those who know fire and the bush. But now, what wild fire might do to him and his quest was a terrifying possibility. He looked about, desperately alert.

Behind him towered a pinnacle of ancient rock, weathered black, cracked by long erosive processes, with here and there a valient tree clinging to ledge or crevice. It was the highest point he had yet seen, higher, surely than any downstream and he chanced that it was higher than any beyond.

He began the labored ascent, pulling himself up from boulder to boulder at the base, finding a ledge that ran upward, swinging to another by the help of a small cedar, working around and away from the river until he gained the top. He stood there, three hundred feet above the river and saw the thing that brought a cry of dismay from his throat.

Windigo Valley stretched before him and the river wound its torturous way through a crack in the hills. Upstream the flat between the cliffs widened and spruces grew thick on the shelves between river and heights. Still beyond that the flats were wider though the timber was not so thick.

It was up there in the sparser growth where the smoke originated. He could see it, brown, angry, thick, rolled along by the stiff breeze, sucking down the valley to obscure it from his view in places. Fire was burning on either side of the stream, eating through birch and poplar toward that thick timber, and he started back down from the height recklessly, for he knew that if fire found hold in those spruce thickets he never could pass between them until it had burned itself out. The country was tinder dry, the wind was rising, blowing the conflagration downstream; the blaze was already hot and it would run—he did not know how fast it would run!

He flung his meager equipment into the canoe, shoved off and put all the strength of back and shoulders against the paddle. He rounded the first bend and was forced to track up a rapid. He raced through to deep water above and again bent savagely to the paddling.

Smoke came thicker now. It stung his eyes and tickled his throat as he drove into it and this, with his quickened breathing, made him cough and strangle.

Within the hour he was between the ranks of tall spruces. The timber grew so thickly! Should he be unable to push through that piece of luxuriant forest before fire found a hold in it he knew he would be caught in a crucible, forced to retreat and, with those rough hills on either side, carrying around the fire and not losing the day was out of the question.

He bent low to his task, dashed water into his eyes, swore through his teeth as a fit of coughing held him back. Smoke was so thick he could scarcely see and he ran the canoe up on a boulder until it all but upset him, and he cried aloud that he *must* get through, that he *must* have his chance!

HE COULD paddle no farther and make time so he slipped out, grappling at the track line. He floundered on and soon felt a breath of hot air, and then a second. He rounded a bend, groping the bottom with his feet and saw an angry glow flicker through the dun curtain that was all about him. He went on a dozen paces and bowed his head against the wave of heat that came to blister his face. He hung there doggedly, unable to take another step, coughing.

Thad looked up, holding his eyes open by sheer force of will and could see that the growth on either side was not so thick. He was nearly through the spruce. The front of the fire was yonder, raging through light birch and poplar. If he could pass it, if he could get that far.

He dragged a blanket from the canoe and soused it in the stream. He lifted the sodden cloth, then, and threw it over his head and shoulders. He did not try to look ahead but looked down at his feet and edged along, protected somewhat from the heat but forced to go forward inch by inch.

Protected from the heat, yes—it did not singe his hair, did not blister his exposed skin, but he drank fire as he gasped for air and could feel the beat of the blast even through his thick, soaked wool shield. It crinkled his eyeballs and though he blinked desperately they remained dry, rough and raw.

The stream was littered with ash and bits of charred trees and a burning brand swirled against his feet, throwing up a spiral of resinous smoke and he drank it in. It stifled him, strangled him, and as he kicked at the thing to be rid of its overwhelming vapor he staggered and fell. The blanket slipped from his shoulders and he felt the furnace breath strike through his shirt so savagely that he cried out even through the choking, and dragged the blanket back about his body with wild haste.

Thad worked on, crawling on hands and knees, water over his hips, for the air was better down there, but the water deepened and he had to rise higher to fight the current. The river tugged at him, swung him about, all but swept him into deep water. He fought savagely to remain in the shoals and finally succeeded, but when he tried to rise—for he went down again—he floundered heavily.

The ordeal was taking its toll. Things grew indistinct. He was conscious chiefly of the great agony it caused him to breathe. He heard indistinctly the savage *woosh* of flame as, reaching the outpost of the spruces, it mounted through the crowns of trees with a cry of destructive delight. He knew he must get out of this, must move or perish, and crawled on. The blanket was hot against him and steam from it further hampered his breathing, but he lurched forward, careful to keep close to the bank, clinging to his track line as doggedly as he clung to consciousness.

But his head spun. His balance was going as his ability to breathe and see were going. He edged along sideways, pulling the canoe a foot at a time by great effort, hearing again and again the furious call of fire as it leaped to the tops of spruces.

It seemed to the boy as though his blanket, his very body must burst into flame under that furnace breath. His flesh cried out for him to turn back, to flop into the canoe and drift down stream out of this torture, but his spirit would not yield. It drove his legs and arms and mind to the task, making him endure fresh degrees of suffering with each step taken, telling his reluctant flesh that by keeping on it would find relief and retain a chance of completing this errand on which it had embarked.

Beyond was sparse growth, grass, light brush burning, generating no such heat as was thrown out by the combustion of spruces. Beyond, then, was relief if his weakening body would only keep on.

He fell again and the immersion of face and head in the river washed away some of the dizziness. He hunched himself along, throat giving out strange sounds of protest. He tried to hold his breath so the heat would not torture his lungs. He rose and ran, a crazy, staggering run, and the blanket, a corner trailing in the water, slipped from his shoulders.

Thad threw up an arm to protect his face from the blast—there was no blast! It was hot, terribly hot, but it did not blister, did not seem to drive needles into his flesh.

Steamers of blue smoke assailed him, the air was filled with ash, but the river was no longer littered with charred brands. He was out of the heavy timber, out where the river flowed through sparse trees, out where the fire had consumed the most that it could —in a burn that was already losing its heat.

He leaned low and drank deep of the breathable air. He crawled into a bed of horsetail and lay down, letting his body chill in the cold water, finding sweet air close to the moist earth of the bank.

AND well he lay there motionless, screened by smoke because, mounted on the tip top of a huge pile of rock litter at the base of a cliff a red-haired man had watched that fire he started run down the stream, nursing a rifle against his belly. Watched the fire, yes, and watched for a boatman to appear through the smoke, should any be fool enough to brave the risk. But after he had seen the great spirals of flame writhe upward from the spruce thicket and none other had appeared Red Bart Delaney went down over the jagged rocks nimbly, face still turned down stream from time to time. He shoved off his canoe and paddled on.

He had delayed his start by hours but he knew that none could follow through the inferno he had started for many times the hours he had invested. Last night, whoever camped below, was less than a day's journey away; now they would be farther off.

To be sure, he could have lain in wait and shot from ambush. But there might be many behind him, and something might go wrong.

Miles below, Tolman and Billie Compton, the girl white, the cruiser gray beneath his bronze, paddled into the thickening smoke cautiously, apprehensive of what they might encounter. Below the spruce forest they halted and waited for the fire to reach the barren strip of rocky waste just above them. It must stop there, and what had burned must cool before they could pass.

CHAPTER X

AND now Red Bart Delaney, working up the Zhing-wauk with rifle-butt ever between his knees, driving up the straight stretches with all the speed made possible by his great strength and his long service with a paddle, but rounding all bends cautiously, so cautiously, now.

Tonight he would make the big beaver meadow; tomorrow night he would reach the cabin he knew and that every man who traveled the river knew. But beyond the cabin, a day's journey by river and trail, stretched the steel of a transcontinental railroad. That was the thing Red Bart feared most. He felt that he had cut off or safely delayed pursuit. No courage he had ever encountered would have braved that fire. It would be night before one could pass that forest he had laid waste, and so his vigilance was ever ahead because, should provincial officers be on the alert for him, they might have stationed themselves at the railroad to cut him off from the rivers that ran to the northward and safety. Or they might even be coming to meet him, outnumbering him many to one, as certain to shoot as he was certain to shoot, with only this difference: behind them stood the law; behind him was only murder.

And so, when he tracked, he carried the rifle in one hand, and when he portaged, as he did thrice that day, he had the weapon ever in his hands, a precaution which slowed him considerably; slowed him almost as much as the dread which rode in his heart, reduced his speed so much, in truth, that when young Chester, with a deputy's badge forgotten in the pocket of his soaked and scorched pants, finally stood up and stepped into the blistered and charred canoe, he was destined to finish the day closer by miles upon the man he pursued than he had been last night.

Thad found the place where his man had camped and cooked fish for his supper. Half a fried trout lay on the wind-swept, rain-washed rock and the boy tucked it into his grub sack because but one more meal of bacon remained and he had not so much as a single fish-hook to use in supplementing this supply.

And the next morning he found the place where Red Bart had camped in the big meadow and knew his journey was drawing to a close. Did the man cross the height of land he could not follow without supplies, should he stop in the cabin and hide out. He shrugged. He did not know what would happen then. He had only his bare hands and his wits, but his wits were clear, clear as crystal, now. He coughed some from yesterday's smoke, but much of the lameness was gone out of him and his whisky-tortured nerves were quieting. He told himself nothing, now, made no promises to self. Occasionally he thought of Billie Compton but, somehow, his impression of her, her looks, sound of her voice, fragrance of her presence were dulled. Remembering her did not bring that thrill it once had because he was considering at close range the slender margin between life and death. He had little time for the consideration of anything except what might happen when he came face to face with the killer or came within range of his rifle.

HE WAS hungry on that fifth day; so hungry that he ached and was faint with it. Last night he had eaten the remnant of Delaney's meal he found. This morning he had had tea; no more. But shortly after noon he spied a porcupine feeding in a poplar tree, landed, chopped down the tree, finished the whimpering beast with the butt of his hand-ax and within minutes was twirling a twig hung with thin strips of flesh over a blaze that was no larger than a good sized cup. He fed small pieces of wood to the fire sparingly and ate the fat, scorched meat with relish.

The meal gave him strength and he stood beside his canoe considering possibilities. Success—if he were to achieve success—was not far away now. Tomorrow—perhaps today—he would overtake his man—And then what? One knee gave sharply, not in conscious fear, but because he was young, untried, and was going, probably, to the ultimate test of a man's fiber.

Before the sun was well down, as he was tracking slowly up a noisy rapid—slowly, now, because he had sacrificed speed for caution—he stopped suddenly and scooped into the water for a half floating object which had caught his eye.

The thing was a twig of alder, freshly broken from its branch. He held it in his hands, turning it over and over. That had been broken today; perhaps within the hour. To be sure, a running moose, a deer crashing through a thicket might have torn it away. But a man, caching a canoe, might also have done it.

Cautiously, then, he led his canoe to the bank. He untied his hand-ax from its anchorage to a thwart, slipped it into his belt and then carefully, very slowly, began making his way up the country, keeping close to the stream, stopping now and again to listen.

Darkness came and he found himself stepping on dry branches, dislodging noisy stones. He sat down to wait for the moon. A great owl hooed at the night and from afar off his ears caught the faint reverberations of a wolf howl. It was difficult to sit there, still, making no progress and his palms sweat in excitement. It seemed as though the moon never would come, but it finally did, as the night was aging and when it was high enough for him to travel quietly he went on.

It was well past midnight, he thought, when he reached the trail which led from river to cabin. No indication of man had come to him and, in the shadows he could not tell if the tracks in the muck beneath the bushes were those of man or beast. Surely the tracks of moose and deer and bear were there but he could make nothing certain of the water-filled depressions in the black earth.

He crawled cautiously up from the thicket and stretched himself over a moss-covered ledge, pressing his ear to the ground. The night was cold and he shuddered. Fireflies danced above the stream behind him and far off the solemn owl whooped at intervals. But no significant sound, no sound of man.

The cabin was little more than a hundred paces from him and a light in it, he knew, would have been visible from that distance. But though he held his straining eyes in that direction for long his searching went unrewarded. He sat up, careful to dislodge no pebble, snap no twig, and debated.

Tolman had been right, day for day, in his guess as to how this man would act. This was the logical place for him to camp this night, because the height of land was less than a forenoon's journey away. Tomorrow—for a man bound toward the northern slope of a continent—would be a day of grilling labor, long portages, hard country through which to travel. It was reasonable to think that such a man would rest; particularly when such a man was in full flight.

But what move to make? He might creep close to that cabin without betraying himself; he might hide and grapple with Delaney when he came down the trail with the dawn. Or, of course, he might be all wrong; Red Bart might not have stopped there. The cabin might be empty—

BUT the cabin was not empty! His nostrils told him that; had been trying to tell him that for minutes as he sat there. He sniffed again. Tobacco! Peerless, the pipe smoke of the woods, pungent, rank, drifting down the slope, held close to the ground by heavy air!

Again came the possibility; that this man he followed might be innocent, yet an innocent man, alone, would have had fire tonight. An innocent man would have made some sound in the length of time he, Thad Chester, had been listening. A cough, a clearing of the throat; anything—but some one was in that cabin; that some one was smoking which meant wakefulness and a man whose mind is at peace and who travels vigorous rivers by day does not lie awake by night.

Thad lay back on one elbow, trying to still the racing of his heart. He was not afraid; he knew no shadow of fear for himself, but he was alone, bare handed, close to an armed and ruthless fugitive. He wanted with all that feverish want that only youth can know to make this capture, to take Red Bart Delaney back to Chester's Dump and prove to the men who had laughed at him that he could measure to manhood by their standards. Significant fact: no thought of Billie Compton traveled his mind in that hour. This was no matter for romance. This situation had nothing to do with a blue-eyed girl who could be divine and devilish in the same moment. Unconsciously, he had put her aside, her part in sending him here, the tragic part she had played in his life.

He tried to recall the things Tolman had told him about conflict, primitive combat in the forest; tried to remember what the cruiser had said of stalking men but only the vaguest fragments floated up through the excitement in him.

Mist drifted down the stream, striking through his clothing. He looked at the lop-sided moon and started. It was not so bright; in the east was the faintest suggestion of gray. He had debated long enough. Time for action had come.

He started crawling up the trail. He went slowly, inch by inch, and when a pebble slid over a half-buried boulder he dropped flat and lay so for long while his heart thumped the stone in suffocating measure until certain that the tiny rattle of sound had not betrayed him.

A breeze arose, the stirring of air before the dawn; he knew and wondered, with a grimace, what this day might hold for him.

He could see the cabin now. About it was a clearing, broken here and there by low poplar growth, and he was about on the edge of scattered cedars which had given him their screening shelter.

The door stood open, wide open, and he lifted himself to his knees so that he might see more, but the light was so faint that he could not be sure. It seemed that a dark huddle lay just within the door, but that might have been fancy or a trick of his overstrained eyes—until the huddle moved—

It moved! And Thad Chester dropped flat, squeezing himself against the ground, grinding his chin into the dirt and holding his eyes on that opening.

The breeze died. In the east the low-hanging stars commenced to fade. Down by the stream a bird twittered sleepily and then—a man snored! A man sleeping in that abandoned cabin snored loudly, repeatedly, a dozen times, the uncouth gaspings of a wearied body!

After the sound ceased the bird chirped again and Thad, worming on his belly, left the last of the cedars. He was in the open now, screened from eyes that might watch from the cabin only by a clump of poplar brush and the long, drenched grass through which he crawled. He crept forward to the bushes and stopped again, trying to still his pulses so the blood would not roar so loudly in his ears.

Birds were singing, light was increasing rapidly, as it does in the north. He could see the figure within the doorway, now a lump beneath blankets. He rose cautiously to his knees, ready to spring if the sleeper moved, and from that position could see the bright butt plate of a rifle, dull in the dawn, protruding from the blankets, barrel across the man's body.

He hitched himself closer to the poplars, stood slowly up and took the first cautious step, but with that movement from the far side of the clearing came a sharp, whistling breath; that, and a crash of brush and the sound of feet on rocks as the browsing deer bounded away.

ONLY a browsing deer, but even before hooves smote the exposed ledge the blankets heaved sharply and the shoulders of a man emerged and let out a snarling, choking oath as from out yonder a shape hurtled on him and beat the breath from him and clawed for his rifle!

It was Red Bart and he swore again as he struck out and felt the rifle torn from his grasp. He kicked and his foot struck the butt of the gun, knocked free from Thad's insecure hold and sent it clattering across the flat stone of the doorstep into the grass.

But the kick had done more. It caught Chester in movement and sent him on to pitch on his face and as he flopped over, reeling to his feet, he saw Red Bart, entangled in his blankets, grasp the sagging door for balance. The door swept toward him with a wail of dry hinges and slammed shut as its swing loosened Delaney's poor hold and he staggered backward, bringing up against the wall. He swung forward then, to take the few strides that would put him back to the door, let him shove it open, cross the threshold and secure the rifle that lay waiting outside but Thad, just coming to erect posture himself, farther from the door than was the other, called into use the only weapon he possessed, his hand-ax, and as it came out of his belt his shout filled the room:

"Another step and I'll cut you in two, Delaney!"

His last chance, that! His last good chance for life itself and his threat convinced Delaney. He stopped. Stopped even as he began his lurch toward the door, his rifle, another killing and escape. He saw the lad poised, hand-ax at arm's length behind him, ready to rush and strike.

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He remained there, one hand put against the logs to help shove him along, contracted slowly to a gnarled fist. He swayed slightly, as though he might even yet brave that risk and resume the rush but he did not and in that instant young Thad assumed the ascendency.

For a long, long moment the boy remained so, the ax ready to strike and then he said again in measured words:

"One step, Delaney, one step for that gun and I'll cut you in two!"

After that he lowered his arm and stood breathing rapidly. Neither spoke. Outside, birds clamored and a squirrel scampered over the roof above them. On that sound Delaney drawled.

"Well, kid, you got yourself into a mess, ain't you?"

Chester did not reply. He was thinking swiftly and knew that to relax his vigilance a fractional second would let Red Bart make the move which meant possession of the rifle. To attempt to secure it himself he must pass close to the man, and that would not do. He would take no chances of hand-to-hand combat with this bully!

A dozen feet only separated them. Spilled from Delaney's blankets his belt and sheath-knife lay almost at Thad's feet. The renegade was completely unarmed, then, and Thad felt a sense of security warm him.

"You step back along the wall," he said, gesturing away from the door.

He could feel the searching gaze from those cold blue eyes though the light was not yet strong enough to let him see much detail.

"What's th' game, Kid?" Delaney asked coolly.

"You move back." He hefted the ax. "I'm going to get your gun and we're going down the river."

He heard the man swallow.

"An' what if I don't step back? What'll you do then?"

Yes, what? He was about to say that he would drive him back with a blow of the ax and yet something rose in him, growing swiftly to revulsion, and Red Bart laughed jeeringly.

"Yeah," he drawled. "'N ax ain't a gent's weapon, is it, kid? If it was a gun, now—but bein' 'n ax, I ain't much mind to do any movin'."

Truth, there! Thad felt it surging through him, dragging dismay with it.

The man would not obey and what was left for him? Strike, of course; strike quickly, lustily, and at the only part of a man's body where an ax is sure to be effective: the head. Crunch a man's skull with an ax to make him move? Thad shuddered; his vitals crawled at the notion. Were he being attacked, should his life be in the immediate balance, were he carried into a frenzy of rage he could strike. But until such a time—Red Bart had been right; the ax is no gentleman's weapon; more: no weapon for a civilized man to use in a mood less than passion.

"Am I right, kid?" the man asked, as though he read the boy's thoughts, and laughed again.

THAD was confused. A moment ago he had believed this man to be in his power; now he was only a party to an armed truce, he being armed against any definite move which menaced his life. Delaney armed against assault by the softening processes of which civilization is made.

The lad stooped, careful to keep alert, and secured Bart's belt and knife. Then he backed to the one sashless window and tossed the belt outside.

He had a sense of fatigue, now, of weakness and backed against the wall, leaning his shoulders to the logs to take some of his weight from his feet. Delaney, across the room, laughed again.

"Tired, eh?" he taunted. "Well, you got license to be. You come fast, for a greenhorn." After a moment he added: "For a drunken bum."

A little thrill went through Thad at that. He was no drunken bum, now. He had come that far. How much farther could he go?

Could he finish what he had started? Could he take this man back to the Dump? How long could he stand here in this small cabin with a ruthless murderer and tell himself that he could not drive that ax into a skull? It seemed the only thing to do; either that or close with Delaney with his bare hands and that entailed heavy risk. McIver had thrown the man out of Papa Pertwee's, but McIver was a mountain of a man—had been, rather, before Red Bart killed him from ambush.

Sunlight slanted across the floor through a gap between logs. It was bright day now, with birds singing all about, a sweet breeze blowing, and the river tumbling down country, down toward the Dump, where he must take this man.

The sun was an hour high before another word was spoken.

"When do we eat?"

Thad said: "We don't eat."

The other shrugged and grinned.

"What we goin' to do then, besides not eat?"

The boy did not reply and after a moment Red Bart chuckled huskily.

"Got yourself in a jack-pot, didn't you, kid?"

A porcupine waddled along outside and began gnawing on a rough sill, snuffling as he consumed the portions of salt or grease he found in the wood fiber. After a time he went away.

Delaney was studying Chester's face now, a white, drawn face, a haggard, worried face, despite the determined set of the jaw. The man's moccasin moved ever so slightly, heel sliding outward, toe then straightening out; heel moving again. The wind dropped and the slight scuff sounded in the silence. Thad tensed, leaping out from his place against the wall, ax half raised.

"Stop it!" he snapped. "Pull back that foot!"

The foot went back and hate glittered in Delaney's eyes and melted away in a malicious grin because when he had followed that order the decision faded from the boy's expression and worry replaced it.

Minutes later Thad moved backward to the wall and leaned against it and gave no flicker of response to Red Bart's scornful laugh.

After another long interval the man spoke again.

"He had it comin'." The other gave no indication that he had heard. "He beat me up an' he had it comin'." He spat viciously. "I hold up my end, allus. He beat me up, an' I dropped him like a beef. You made a fool play an' I'll get you in the end." He nodded in calm threat.

The threat stuck in his consciousness and in another half-hour he asked:

"What's it goin' to get you?" Then answered himself: "Nothin', but what he got. I won't make no move for that gun—yet. You won't make no move but stand there like a damn owl because if you do you'll get what he got. You ain't got the guts to swing that ax on me, kid."

"We'll see," the boy said grimly, but knew his response was flat. When Bart laughed, though, a new rage came. "We'll see before night!" He narrowed his eyes and nodded slowly.

"Tryin' to make me think the's others comin'? I ain't simple! You're makin' a lone-hand, fool play because nobody else had th' guts even to make a start after me. I know." And he did know, Thad felt, with another cause for dismay. "If others was comin', they'd been with you; or before you. It's you 'nd me—nobody else. Oh, you're in a hell of a mess!"

"Shut up, Delaney!"

"All right; anythin' to please," mockingly.

Thad hated to meet the other's eyes. Physically he held a temporary upper hand; spiritually, he was slipping, losing ground. The man would wait the day out and when darkness came he could make that door undetected. That was—well, at the least, it was disconcerting.

His hand was sweating against the ax-handle and he felt his pulse quickening. It held to that speedy measure and he felt his skin growing fever hot.

Between now and darkness, then, he must do one thing or another. He must bring himself to strike with the weapon of a mad man or he must risk the fate that had befallen McIver.

Sunlight, from a crack in the roof, crept across his eyes and he moved out of it. Sunlight, from that angle! The sun had reached its height! Darkness was half-way here and Delaney, squatting on his heels, sat and watched him, almost indifferently, as though he were waiting for some casual happening.

With their positions reversed Thad knew Red Bart would not hesitate. He would strike his life out with a savage joy. But he was not Red Bart. He wanted to fight fair, even though his adversary would stop at nothing.

HE BEGAN to wish that Delaney would make some desperate decision, some sudden move: a lurch toward that door, a brash attempt to seize the gun, which would let down all bars. He could strike then, strike to maim and kill. But Delaney would do no such thing; he would wait for the cover of night. And in the darkness he could not even strike

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effectively with his ax. In darkness it would be, at last, man to man, hand to hand. Man to man and hand to hand, the fairest terms on which men have fought since the beginning of time. Thad Chester, a youth, less than a week from a drunken bum, against Red Bart Delaney, who had been whipped but once in hand-to-hand fighting.

A fair fight it would be when darkness came, if it be fair for a lad who had never had his trial to go against a woods bully with a reputation that had spread far over the north. Was that fair? Had he a chance in a fight like that, with the record he had already written to attest to his strengths and his weaknesses?

But he had come on this errand, persisted in it. For the first time in his life he had driven himself to a grilling task. He told himself that consciously, forming the sentence with moving lips after he had decided it was so. For the first time he had put himself to a great task, he had made himself do a difficult work. He had made himself keep on when whisky called him back! He had made himself travel the river with better speed even than this hardened traveler had shown. At dawn he had made himself take for the time the upper hand of this fellow, Delaney. He had done these things because he *believed* he could do them!

For the first time since he left the Dump, he realized how he had accomplished what was behind him. Why, for the first time in his life he had believed in himself! He had started out in the north to show his father he had manhood, engaging in what other men considered hardships but what was for him, with his excess of youth's vitality, only play. He had encountered the first real obstacle of his experience in a girl and from the beginning had sensed his own inadequacy, had known he would fail with her, and had failed.

Casual words of old Tom Tolman's homely philosophy spoken about camp-fires came back: "It ain't what a man does easy-like that counts; it's what's hard for him to do that shows his stuff. Thinkin' you can do a job is nine-tenths the gettin' ready for it. If I was to judge a man, I'd sooner see him in one tight pinch than in a hundred places where he knew about what was going to happen." Homely old truisms, and yet, he now thought, containing all the wisdom of the ages.

He wiped his sweaty hand on his hip slowly. He had to do this thing, he knew; he had started out to take Red Bart back and he must do that or know that the Dump's laughter was justified, know that he had not that belief in self which makes nothing else matter!

Delaney started up as Thad's arm made a wide back-hand sweep and the ax went spinning through the sashless window. The man came up, arms bent, fists clenching, cold triumphant fire sweeping into his eyes.

Thad poised in mid-floor and his voice was thick.

"We won't wait, Delaney. You're right, damn you—the ax— But this, it's different."

His rush pinned the other to the wall for a second and the man's breath was hot on his cheek. His first blow found its mark on Delaney's chin and he heard the bullet head thud against the log and drove at Bart's stomach with the other. But a knee, snapping upward, half lifted him from his feet, sent nauseating pain tearing through his vitals and he was swung back, turned around, his balance rocked by a blow in the face.

He had pinned one of Bart's arms to his side and with the other hand groped for the bearded throat, shielding his own face against the man's chest. Another blow on the temple staggered him and he lost the grip which had held one of Delaney's hands helpless.

"—— damn cub, damn drunken——"

The words sounded hollowly through the pain which sickened him but the first exquisite edge of that suffering was turned and he resisted the efforts to drive him off, to get in the blow that would throw him off balance. He grappled blindly for the arms that flailed at him, wound his foot about Red Bart's lower leg and then went down with a crash.

He was curiously alive as they fell sideways, face to face, neither having the advantage in the fall, and as they struck he let go his clasp of the man's body, kicked and rolled free, staggering to his feet clear across the room.

"I can!" he gasped aloud. "I *can*."

He tried to sidestep as Delaney rushed with a husky roar of rage and triumph but he did not turn the trick; neither did he get in the blow he started and they clinched again, Delaney's head grinding hard into the

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pit of his stomach, one of Delaney's hands gripping his wrist and as he tried to shove free sharp teeth sank into the flesh of his palm.

A scream of pain was wrung from him by that but the quick up-drive of a knee as he let go and reeled backward loosened the clamp of Delaney's jaws and this time when the man rushed he *knew* he could get in that blow and struck him fairly in the mouth with a rocking force.

AGAIN Delaney roared out that he was a drunken cub as he flung out his arms for a new hold on Thad's body. By then the lad realized that his best chance was in open fighting. The other was too heavy, too abnormally strong for him when they grappled and he backed away, swinging again at the lowered head, leaping to one side when Red Bart dived for him and gasping out that he could—he could!

With more experience in such battling he might have dropped on his adversary because Delaney missed his hold and scrubbed across the floor, but before Thad could follow that advantage the man was up, coming stealthily toward him.

A fierce joy was surging the lad's veins, thought of danger, consideration of the outcome should a blow drive out consciousness, should those hands find hold on his throat were all gone. This was a test, once and for all, of the stuff in him. This was the manhood he had been sent north to find. Such thoughts swirled his mind, even in the heat of terrific combat, with thick dust choking him, pain scourging him.

Delaney kicked with dexterity and the moccasin struck him in the side, driving the breath from him. He was forced to close then to keep his feet and sickened as a hard hand slid across his face, and fingers felt for his eyeballs. He shook off the menace of gouging and they waltzed about the room close locked.

A blanket tripped them and they went down, Delaney twisting with his last fraction of balance and Thad was forced to bite back a cry as the man's weight crushed him.

"So," Delaney sobbed.

He broke off to cough as his fist bashed into Thad's cheek and the other hand clawed for the boy's throat, nails digging into the flesh. The cough turned that crisis, for with a quick updrawing of his knees Thad half rose beneath the weight, pitched sideways and when they went down again he was on top.

But he was unable to hold there, though he shouted that he could. He rained blows on the man's face but it would not stay down. He wrapped his legs about Delaney's legs but Red Bart wriggled loose. His wrist was caught by those savage teeth again but he did not cry out. He got one of the other's hands beneath a knee, his free thumb found a windpipe and then he had two hands to use.

Still, he could not hold his throttling grip and when Delaney tore the hand from beneath the prisoning knee it swung out, struck a cobblestone that had once been used to supplement a broken stove-leg and flung it upward.

Thad saw it coming but the stone grazed his head and he went over backward. He got half-way to his feet before Delaney was on him but things were going black. His head was ringing torment, his legs and arms were heavy, hard to lift, let alone move adroitly. He was going out, losing consciousness, being dragged down and beaten and he could not help himself.

That assertion of failure, burning through his dazed wits in a white-hot streak of alarm, gave him life and somehow he got up, with Delaney sobbing as he clung to his belt to hold him back and flung himself about and free.

Red Bart stood in mid-room gasping. The shirt was torn from his torso. The skin beneath a mat of red hair was scratched and bruised. Blood trickled into his beard and in his eyes was the light of a mad animal. In the stillness, even through the torrential rush of blood in his own head, Thad Chester heard that bubbling, gasping breath, realized that Delaney would not longer carry the fight. The man was swaying, staggering, edging away, preparing to—

The boy cried hoarsely. He had forgotten the gun outside but now Delaney was after it, trying to edge toward the door and he stopped as Thad charged and screened his face with his forearms and doubled and fell against the wall.

But he had his feet again in an instant because the boy was reeling with weakness, brushing blood from his eyes, and when they met hands found Thad's throat. Hard fingers locking about his neck, biting into his flesh, tearing it and shutting off his breath.

They fell and as they fell another pair of hands locked on another throat and felt the gristly windpipe slip beneath their pressure. So, rolling on the floor, each with a strangle hold, will matched will. Blood seemed ready to burst Thad's ear-drums, spasmodic, choking ran the length of his chest but he could not cough. He twisted his head, seeking to tear it free. His foot found pressure on Red Bart's chest and he shoved tentatively.

It was all so slow, now, movement was so ponderous, so deliberate. The pain of actual grip on his throat, the darkness, the pressure in his ears, the bursting of his lungs hammered at his will, but his determination would not yield.

And then he was drenched with water. His throat, his lungs, his head filled with—with water? Under Heaven, it was air! He was breathing. He had broken Red Bart's hold and his own clutch was secure!

He lay there a long, long time, coughing, strangling, squeezing his eyes shut while the other struggled feebly. Hands tugged at his wrists but the fingers would not hold. They groped feebly again and again but each time the effort was weaker. The man trembled; strange and terrible sounds came from him and then he lay still.

Thad opened his eyes and relaxed the grip of his hands. A retching moan, long-drawn, came from Delaney. The boy hitched himself to his knees and fell dizzily across that prone body. His own breath was shallow and swift and things were fading away. Even that sweet air, as tangible as water itself, could not keep his mind clear. Slowly he unbuckled his belt and dragged it through its loops. He drew Bart's wrists together painfully and pinned them to the small of the man's back with a knee. Then, with the greatest care he had ever exercised in his life, he bound them tight.

After a long, long time he roused again. His fingers groped along the moaning man beneath him. Another belt came free. He bound the ankles with that, putting into the last long pull on the leather the final iota of strength that remained in him.

Red Bart Delaney was his, bound hand and foot. He had done what he had to do, what he had believed he could do, and let go all holds.

CHAPTER XI

WORDS aroused him. The words were.

"He done what he come for!"

Thad found himself sitting up, staring into the fading sunset. In the doorway stood a man, rifle under his arm. He could not make out features but the voice was Tolman's and after he had said those words he turned sharply to say to another:

"Stay there, Billie. He's all right, but it's nothin' for a girl to look at."

Nothing for a girl to look at, either, two nights later when they camped at the foot of Zhing-wauk Lake. Hands bound behind him, morose, watching the others, Red Bart sat against a smooth boulder.

Tolman was cleaning a pike down at the shore and Thad stood beside Billie Compton winding a clean cloth about his wrist where the marks of teeth were.

Until then they had not spoken of the thing so high in the consciousness of each, but when Thad looked at the girl and saw her eyes so fast on him, he knew it must be said.

"I guess, Billie, I've got a lot to thank you for," he said, trying to make his voice sound natural.

"No, Thad, nothing at all. It's I who—"

He did not notice that her voice had broken, so concerned was he with the thing he must say. He wanted to say it gently, now; once, in the beginning back there in the cabin, he had been bitter, but he was bitter no longer; yet he knew she must understand him.

"It's funny, but I guess I'm not the kind that would do for you, Billie. You see, I don't amount to a great deal. This wasn't much. I just sort of had it to do. But now—I guess I've got to go out and do a lot of things. And so—well, you needn't say whatever it was you thought you were obliged to say."

A stumbling, fumbling attempt, but the girl knew what was in his heart. She knew that he had looked death in the face to see life. She knew that he thought her a silly little fool who would never know life. She knew that even though she had been a factor in letting him find himself she had sent him into the shadow lightly, selfishly, to exercise her power over a man; he knew that too, and held her, because of it, less than the dust.

She knew these things, but she took it standing and said steadily:

"Very well, Thad. I think I understand."

And again two days passed; Red Bart was in jail and the Dump was getting back to normal from its second upheaval. Billie Compton was at Tolman's feet, crying her heart out after that long, long talk and saying again and again: "I don't blame him—but I've grown up—I've grown up."

For an interval the old cruiser stroked her yellow hair with his hard hand and his eyes were far away.

Thad Chester was gone, rather savagely, abruptly, packing his things and saying good-by to the Dump. No, he wouldn't be back, he had said. He had things to do; life was full of things waiting to be done.

The old man shook cold ashes from his pipe.

"Now, let me git up, Sister," he said and gently lifted her head from his knees. "I got just about time."

She sat on one hip on the floor, wiping her eyes; sober eyes, now; more lovely than they ever had been, with womanhood there instead of deviltry.

"Make what, Uncle Tom?" she asked.

"Town, an' th' train for th' Straits. I 'spect his daddy'll know where to find him. If he don't, I'll have to fuss around until I pick up his trail myself."

She did not move, did not speak. As he pulled the old valise from under his bunk he looked at her and winked soberly.

"Of course I'm goin' after him! It wouldn't be lady-like for you to, would it? An' somebody's got to, ain't they? Lord, yes: somebody's *got* to!"

He cleared his throat gruffly, in irritation. He had experienced too much emotion of late for an old codger.

Two Extremely Effervescent Novelettes in Next Month's Everybody's

"The Long Rider" by William Corcoran is a Western novelette with a bit of love and a whirlwind of action.

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(*Don't forget! A new issue of Everybody's every month on the* 20th.)

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A

A story of the Amazon—Dice play a Part

HE WAS a big, clean, competent, sanely functioning human machine—young, not in years, but with the youth that leaves some men only when the spirit departs, and we bury them. He was no more than a random acquaintance—we met on a park bench—but Bill Morgan left upon me an extraordinarily deep impression. Oddly enough, it is his hands that I remember first, large, shapely, well-cared-for, and competent.

"Competent" is the word that best summarizes the man. I recall thinking at the time that there was something wrong in a country where a man like that had to sit on a park bench in a crowded city and watch the fountain play, waiting for something to turn up.

I was waiting for a delayed check from home. What he was waiting for, or if it came to him, I do not know. He was there one day, and the next—a big, hearty, sandy-headed, freckled creature, casual and picturesque in his language, illiterate but forcefully graphic in his power to make one see what he had seen—and then he was gone, and I never saw him again.

But he had passed through experiences that never come to us who dream of them. In those competent hands he had held the high justice and the low; he had been law, judge and jury, and executioner; and he had functioned as casually and unemotionally as he might have at his favorite game of Kelly pool.

"So you're aimin' to be a writer, hey?" he asked me. "Sometimes I wish I was—some of the things I've seen and went through with would make a middlin' tall yarn. Probably the home folks here wouldn't believe it to any great extent, but I'll bet my hat they'd read it. I've been around a bit."

So had I, as I modestly informed him.

"Oh, yes—this sort of thing—" His wide gesture might have included and swept into the dust-bin all the cities of the earth. "What I mean, I've sort of been down at the roots of things, where the dirt sticks. Say, now, if you want a yarn, take this here thing."

He produced a newspaper and pointed out an item. It was a protest against the British monopoly in rubber, and it suggested that the United States develop rubber plantations in its own tropical possessions.

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A CONCESSION *in* RUBBER

by *Charles Stilson*

"Fine idea," approved Bill Morgan; "but if the rubber lands in the Philippines and the folks who live in 'em are anything like them in South America, why, your Uncle Dudley ain't takin' any."

He unbuttoned a cuff and bared a mighty arm, clean and powerful, like the rest of him. Part way between wrist and elbow was a broad, irregular band like a bracelet, of livid, shiny skin that resembled the cicatrix left by a scald.

"I got that down there," he went on, "along with some other things to remember the rubber country by that are deeper, but, in a way of speakin', ain't visible to the naked eye."

ONE of his cousins had been secretary of a syndicate which had purchased a rubber concession from the Brazilian Government, and he had persuaded the other officials that Bill was the right man to go down and get the lay of the land.

"Well, we all make mistakes," said Bill; "and that was their's and mine.

"Skippin' the preliminaries, you can picture me travelin' up country on the Amazon from Rio in a galatea boat, which is a boat with a roof on it, an' rowed by Indians which wear cotton drawers inside the city limits.

"With me was a skinny little Portugee geezer who was the Brazilian representative of the B. & A. Rubber Co. He was a queer little dude, in a suit of white cheese-cloth and a pan-ny-ma hat, with a face the color of a new suitcase, an' black rat-tails on each side of his mouth that was waxed an' twisted till you could pick your teeth with 'em, an' he carried a dinky little yellow cane with a white china horse's head on it. To round him off, he had great big black eyes that made you think of Carmen the beautiful cigaret smoker.

"His name was Don Joao da Silva, but I got to callin' him Silver Joe, an', for all his make-up, I'm tellin' the cock-eyed world he was a real man.

"We was eight weeks gettin' up to the edge of the rubber swamps, through the heat, mosquitoes, flies an' other things which work their fellow man for a livin' along the Amazon. But one day Silver Joe says we was there, though it looked just like anywhere else to me, an' we tied our old housescow to some trees that grew out of the water, an' our Indians give their college yell, an' all of 'em but two went off somewhere to visit their relations. Joe an' me, with them two to tote our duds, started to hoof it through the big woods to a station where Joe says a government agent was waitin' to show me over the property.

"Animals! say, there was things that walked, and crawled, and flew, and swum in that jungle that a feller never expects to see outside of the D. T.'s. Nights we roosted in the trees like chickens, me tyin' myself to a limb so's I wouldn't fall into the yawp of what might be waitin' under my perch with its mouth open.

"WHEN we was two days on that hike, we hears one afternoon a noise deep in the woods like somebody was rollin' empty barrels downstairs.

"Pedro an' Big Casino (Pedro was Pedro's name, an' I called the other bearer Big Casino because I couldn't twist my tongue to his real moniker, an' he was a big mutt)—well, them two stopped and looked at each other like a feller does when he remembers he's forgot to mail his wife's letters, an' Pedro says '*Tunduy!*' an' Casino says, 'Urgh-h-h!' an' his teeth begin to rattle, an' they both throw down their loads like the six o'clock whistle has blew.

"I looks at Joe, an' he looks back kinda funny, whirlin' his little cane with the horse's head which he never let go of, an' which was mighty handy killin' rattlesnakes.

" 'Eet ees Indians,' he says.

" 'Probably our gang has got home an' their friends is givin' 'em a sarah-nade,' I says. 'Let's go over an' see if we can buy a loaf of bread.'

"Then I seen Pedro an' Big Casino was almost whimperin', an' I ast Joe what was the idea, an' he says they are afraid.

" 'Why, they ain't wild Indians, are they?' I says, an' I felt the first cool feelin' since I'd hit Brazil.

"Joe give me a pityin' look. 'They are verree wild, saneyor,' he says.

" 'But they don't take scalps or nothin' like that, do they?' I asts.

" 'No, saneyor, but they cut off the head,' he says, an' with that I remembered that I'd read something of the sort somewhere, but I thought at the time that it was ancient history.

" 'What we waitin' for?' I says, and I turned round pronto, which, if you don't know, means damn sudden.

"But Joe says it's no use to go back; that the *tunduys*—which is drums made outta hollow trees—means the Indians knows we are there, an' that our one best bet is to beat it for the rubber station more pronto than pronto. With that, he lets out a double-jointed cuss in Portugee an' jabs a pistol into Pedro's belly, who had give signs of boltin'.

"If they was wild Indians in the woods, I ast Joe how-come there is a government chap at the station.

" 'Eet may be that he ees not, saneyor,' says Joe, makin' little crosses in the air with his finger. 'Eet ees that Enrique has keel a man in Rio, an' he have to take thees job or be hang, so he come here.'

"All afternoon we hear them *tunduys*, sometimes to the right, an' sometimes to the left, but we don't see no Indians. At sundown we make the station, which was a snug little bungalow perched up on fifteen-foot stakes in a clearin' with some Indian shanties behind it.

"This Enrique chap was roostin' up on the front porch, smokin' a cigaret with a rifle acrost his knees, an' lookin' like a twin to Silver Joe, except that Enrique wears a beard. Well, Joe an' him makes a palaver in Portugee, an' he lets down a ladder an' they kisses each other, an' Enrique lets us all in, though he was kinda leery about Pedro an' Casino, sayin' all his own gang had took to the timber when the *tunduys* started thumpin'.

"He give us some supper, which was polluted with garlic, an' Joe an' me hit the hay in a couple of bunks in the bungalow, while Enrique made Casino and Pedro get out and get under, so to speak, spreadin' their blankets at the roots of the house.

"I WAS in the middle of playin' Kelly pool with Hink Sweezy an' Butch Horner, when I come to, settin' up in the bunk, an' with the roots of my hair ticklin' like a breeze was blowin' through it. There was a bright moon, an' in a patch of it on the floor by the window I seen Silver Joe settin' cross-legged an' smokin' a cigaret an' lookin' at me kinda mournful.

" 'For the luvva Mike what woke me up?' I ast.

“‘Eet ees the Aguarunas, my saneyor,’ Joe says, tappin’ gentle on the floor with his little cane.

“Well, I lit a match an’ looked at the blankets. ‘I can’t find none,’ I says, ‘what do they look like?’

“‘Al-ways you make the joke, Saneyor Beel Morgan,’ says Joe ‘which ees well; for so we shall die with the smile, yes.’

“An’ just then there come one awful screech from out in the big woods, an’ my hair begun to shimmy again.

“‘Indians!’ I says.

“‘Si, saneyor — Aguarunas, the most feared of them all,’ says Joe, lightin’ another cigaret. “Soon they come an’ take the heads, yes.’

“‘An’ what will we be doin’?’ I ast, not meanin’ that they would take mine without an argument.

“‘Eef we have the guns, saneyor, perhaps we do mooch,’ says Joe; ‘but Pedro, he have gone into the forest, an’ he have take all the guns.’

“‘Not mine, he ain’t,’ I says, an’ dives for the bunk where I had stuck my .45 automatic under the blanket, an’ then I says several different varieties of damns, for it wasn’t there.

“‘Can’t we get outta here an’ head for the river before they come?’ I ast Joe.

“‘Out there is one who has tried, saneyor,’ says Joe, pointin’ outta the window; ‘but I would advise that the saneyor not look.’

“Well, I didn’t take his advice, an’ out there in the grass an’ the moonlight was Big Casino layin’ with a long arrow between his shoulders, an’ — well, he was shorter by a head than when I seen him last, an’ for a minute I was wishin’ there was a nice low peach tree handy which I could hang over. Then I begins to get mad.

“I went out in the front room, an’ there was Enrique settin’ on a bench, smokin’ a cigaret an’ hummin’ a little tune with his head tied up in a rag. To shorten things, that yellow pup Pedro had done a porch-climbin’ job in the night, an’ had come behind Enrique in his bare feet an’ give him a wallop on the dome, an’ then had stole the guns. An’ poor old Casino, who wasn’t no traitor, had tried to stop Pedro, an’ some one out in the woods had give Casino his with an arrow in the back.

“DO YOU know them rummies out there?’ I ast Enrique, an’ he says they was old Chief Jorge an’ his tribe, an’ they had just come into that neighborhood after bein’ away awhile, an’ was drivin’ the rubber men out an’ raisin’ hell general.

“Well, me gettin’ madder all the time thinkin’ what they had done to Big Casino, I ast Enrique to holler down to Chief Jorge for me that if he had a drop of sportin’ blood in him, he’d send his best scrapper out on the grass in the moonlight, an’ I’d take him on for six or ten rounds, win, lose or draw—only I meant to make it a finish. You see, I used to swing a fair mitt at the old N. Y. A. C., an’ a man never forgets it.

“Enrique looked at me like he thought I was bugs. ‘What!—the saneyor would go down there?’ he ast, pointin’ to where poor Casino was lyin’ on his face—or would have been, only the Aguarunas had took it with ’em. ‘Eet ees madness,’ he says. ‘What’s the diff?’ I says; ‘they’re comin’ up here, ain’t they?’

“Little Silver Joe come out swingin’ his cane an’ looked up at me, an’ says, ‘Eef you go, I will go with you, Saneyor Beel Morgan. Eet ees better than to wait here, yes—but I theenk bes’ of all ees thees—’ an’ he presses a spring in the cane an’ pulls out a shiny stiletto with a blade a foot long an’ offers it to me, horse’s head first, an’ says, ‘After you, saneyor,’ with a bow like a chap outta one of Laura Jean Elizabeth’s novels.

“I tells him to put it up, ’cause if we’re goin’ to get killed, let Jorge do it in the regular way, but I had a hunch that we wasn’t, an’ in the meantime would Enrique please holler down that I was ready to meet Jorge’s best battler catch weights, Marquis of Queensberry—or he could make it a wrastlin’ bout if he wanted to, providin’ he didn’t bar the strangle-hold.

“Enrique couldn’t get me at all, but Silver Joe had a grain of gray stuff in his bean, an’ he put up his stiletto an’ stepped out on the front porch an’ begun a palaver. It didn’t sound none like what I told him to say, but he musta got it across, for pretty soon there come a lot of yowlin’ from the bushes an’ Joe tells me that Chief Jorge is down there himself, an’ is took by my idea.

“So I took off my shirt an’ tied my suspenders round my waist an’ done a little

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shadow boxin' to loosen up the old soup bones, an' then I climbs down the ladder which me an' Joe has let down. Joe wanted to go, too; but I says no, it's my funeral; an' besides, I figured I could handle one Indian all right, if there wasn't interference from the bleachers.

"So I walked out where the moon was shinin', an' all round the clearin' the tall trees was wavin' slow overhead an' the bushes was rustlin', an' I could hear the big dewdrops splashin' on the leaves. I begun to wonder where was the Aguarunas, an' then I seen 'em.

"All along the edge of the jungle they was squattin' in the shadow of the bushes. There musta been two hundred of 'em, an' they never moved or said nothing, just set an' stared at me, an' I could see the shine of their eyes like so many cats.

"I forgot that they couldn't talk United States, or maybe I was some flustered. Anyway, I nods an' says, 'Well, gents, where's your champ?' I says, an' nobody says a word; but I seen their eyes roll, an' then I seen him.

"Say, I seen some big pugs in my time, but the chap that come prancin' outta that jungle had a pile on any of 'em. He wasn't so tall as big Jess, but he didn't lack much of it, an' he had more than Jeff's beef, an' all the spring an' pep that made Jack Johnson a world-beater. Muscles! When I got a squint at 'em, I thinks to myself: 'Bill, if this bird runs true to form, you sure have bit off a mouthful—an' if he ever gets you in a clinch, oh boy!'

"HE COMES dancin' on, an' all his fellow citizens leaned forward with their hands on their knees like so many outfielders.

"As he come clost I seen that outside of tattoo marks he didn't have on enough to tie up a cut finger. There was a big bone spike through his nose an' another in his lip an' rings in his ears, an' he had his hair in a braid, an' all over him he was shiny with grease.

"He didn't know no ring manners, like shakin' hands, an' when he was six feet off he lets a roar outta him like a bull lion an' jumps, kickin' straight out in front of him with a number fourteen bare foot.

"I seen he was goin' to fight dirty, which suited me, so I ducks an' pastes him with my right to the guts, an' he says, 'Urmph!' an' covers 'em with both hands, when I gives him the left to the button as hard as I dast an' not bust my hand.

"He teetered on his pins, an' I thought I had him goin', an' I heard Silver Joe holler from the porch:

" 'Bravo, my saneyor!'

"An' then, as I got set to put over the haymaker, my foot slipped on the wet grass, an' we come together.

"He got his arms round me an' squeezed till my eyes was poppin'; but I still had my mitts loose, an' I grabbed for his pigtail an' missed it, but got an ear instead, an' twisted the rings outta it. He howled an' put more steam into his squeeze, but he didn't know enough to flop me, so I dismantles his other ear an' then his nose an' lip, an' has both hands full of bone jewelry, the loss of which pained him considerable.

"He counters by tryin' to bite a hunk outta my bare shoulder, an' I says, 'You big ——!' an' gets my thumbs into his throat. He'd sweat an' started his grease to runnin', so I got a good holt, an' pretty soon we went to the grass with me on top, an' I guess I was seein' red.

"When I set up, there was Silver Joe, twirlin' his cane an' blowin' out smoke thoughtful.

" 'You have keel heem, saneyor,' he says, 'which ees verree good,' an' I heard the Aguarunas howlin' like wolves, an' then my lamps went out.

"WHEN I come to, it was broad daylight. I was on a cane bed in an Indian shanty, with Silver Joe leanin' over me, an' Enrique settin' in the doorway, smokin' a cigaret an' lettin' his feet hang over.

"While I was yawnin' an' feelin' for black an' blue places, an' findin' plenty, Joe give me the lay of things, which was that Jorge's boys had jumped us after the fight an' took us off to their main village. They hadn't croaked us, says Joe, because Jorge wanted to meet personal the guy that had laid big Washula cold, the said Wash havin' enjoyed a heavy local rep as a scrapper.

"I ast Joe what was the next move after Jorge had seen me, an' Joe says a funeral. 'But we have the knife, saneyor,' he says, showin' the little cane, 'an' with eet we can give him the gran' cheat.'

"I told Joe to hold his horses, includin' the one on the cane; as I wasn't thinkin' of dyin' so long as there was somethin' else

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to do. I thought mebbe we could get this Jorge boy to listen to reason, seein' how he had been such a sport about pullin' off the fight between me an' Wash.

"Just then I remembered that I hadn't wound my watch, an' I tore off a few, 'cause it wasn't on me, nor much of anything else worth mentionin', except a few matches an' some loose change in one of my pants pockets, an' my money-belt which was strapped round my leg. I didn't even have my shirt.

"Pretty soon a girl fetched us our breakfast, an' when she set the basket down I looked pronto at the roof an' coughed so's to give her a chanst to pick up whatever she'd dropped; but she hadn't dropped nothin', an' I soon seen all the other women in town dressed that way.

"The breakfast wasn't bad after the garlic I'd had at Enrique's place; but what we ate I don't know. I ast no questions beforehand 'cause I was hungry, and I ast none afterward 'cause I wanted to do business with Jorge on a full stummick.

"When we was through with the eats an' I'd tipped the waitress a quarter, which she stuck in her mouth, a half dozen of Jorge's huskies come an' took us along just as we was, which was O. K. for Joe an' Enrique, but I didn't have no shirt.

"Jorge's town had walls more than twenty feet high, an' every so often there was a bozo with a spear on his shoulder like a shovel patrollin' his beat, which was why Jorge hadn't bothered to tie us up. There was rows an' rows of them little malucca houses settin' up on wooden stakes, an' near the gate was a tall thing built of beams which looked like an oil derrick, but which Enrique says was a war tower.

"Well, the cits crowded into the streets like they do on a circus day in a hick town when the elephant goes by, an' it didn't take no figurin' to see that I was the main attraction, an' was gettin' more notice from Jorge's folks than I ever will on Broadway. I s'pose it was my red hair an' white skin done the trick, an' there was plenty of the latter showin'.

"While we was on our way I happened to look into one of them maluccas, an' I seen our guns leanin' against the wall, an' that yellow pup Pedro staked out on the floor like a muskrat's hide on a barn door an' lookin' like he'd been badly handled, for which I didn't feel no sorrow.

"BY an' by the parade ended down by the war tower, an' there was old Jorge settin' under a tree with his board of aldermen, an' I goes right up an' shakes hands with him an' says, 'How are you, mayor,' 'cause you see I didn't have nothin' personal against Jorge—except that I wanted my shirt an' things back—an' I felt that what I'd done to Wash had pretty near sawed off the Big Casino deal.

"I ain't no beauty myself, but if old Jorge is still livin', I got it over him like a tent. He was little an' skinny an' wizened like he was smoke-dried an' he had a big head with one shoulder higher'n the other an' a couple of toes was missin' from his left hind foot, an' when he grinned at me, which he did when I shook his hand, I seen we had one point in common, only a dentist had made mine good—he hadn't a tooth in his head. His nose an' lips an' ears was hung with bone ornaments like I'd took off of Wash.

"But I'm here to say that old Jorge was a dead game sport, an' full of the joy of life an' takin' it. The front of his malucca, which stood by itself behind the war tower, was hung with skulls like he'd dug up a cemetery, an' all his hide which wasn't covered with tattoo marks was laced with scars.

"I set down an' made Joe an' Enrique set down too, an' tell Jorge for me that I was pretty well considerin' an' I hoped he was the same, an' we was gettin' along swell till a guy come buttin' in which I didn't like the looks of, 'cause to begin with he was wearin' my shirt. He was dirty an' smelled of ham-fat an' had the rattles off'n rattlesnakes hung all over him, an' a live one wound round his arm.

"By the way this bozo talked to Jorge, I could see he was tryin' to start somethin' unhealthy, an' Joe leans over an' tells me he was the medicine-man an' he was recommendin' to Jorge that they make a few trials of my spunk. 'They are veree painful, saneyor,' Joe says; 'ees eet not time that we use thee knife?'

"I says no, but if there's goin' to be medicine made, step over to Jorge's malucca where I seen my luggage layin' an' fetch it, an' mebbe I'd try some, too. So Joe gets my duffel-bag, Jorge grinnin' an' not offerin' to interfere.

"The medicine-man comes snoopin'

around me an' feels my muscles an' pokes me in the ribs; an' pretty soon one of the feathers in his hat tickles my nose an' I sneeze, an' my upper plate flies out an' hits him on the hand.

"You'd oughta heard him holler, an' he jumped away, rubbin' his hand, an' I grabbed the plate an' stuck it back in my face with a sweep of my arm an' turns an' grins at Jorge, showin' him my gums well lined, an' the whole meetin' couldn't make nothin' of it, an' the board of aldermen shows signs of wishin' to adjourn.

"Old Jorge, though, sets tight, an' Johnny Medicine-man gets his nerve back, but keepin' an eye on me, an' pulls two little sticks outta his pouch an' rubs 'em together, an' groans, an' pretty soon he has a little tongue of fire started. He watches to see how I'm takin' it, but any Boy Scout coulda done it, an' I seen old Jorge didn't think much of it himself.

"In the middle of it I leans over an' spits on the blaze, an' digs in my pants pocket for a match an' snaps it with my thumbnail an' starts a little fire of my own. This sort of interested Jorge, an' he says something, an' Joe tells me, 'You have save yourself from the trial of fire, saneyor, but all ees not feeneesh—now they bring the tocandeiras.'

" 'What's that?' I ast, an' Joe says:

" 'The little red ants of the jungles, of which the bite ees like the fire eetself. They will put them on your hands, saneyor.'

"I had a little medicine kit that I'd brung from New York, with some analgeezick balm in it, an' I squeezed a hunk of it onto my mitts an' rubbed it in, takin' a chanst that the ants would lay off'n it.

"Mr. Medicine-man fetches a sort of glove made of bark, in which he has penned a handful of the insecks, an' he ties it onto my mitt, keepin' his eye peeled for my jumpin' teeth.

"I wears his damned glove for ten minutes or so, an' I don't mind tellin' you that I done a lot of squirmin' inside, though I dastn't show it—I found out that I hadn't rubbed the analgeezick high enough, which is how I got my pretty little bracelet.

"When old ham-fat takes his glove off'n me, all his ants which have got mixed up with my analgeezick is dead or disabled, which is another point for me, an' creates a sensation.

"THINKS I, 'old boy, you've annoyed me just about enough, an' I'm goin' to give you a dose of your own medicine,' an' I digs out a little bottle of nitric acid with a glass cork, which I carries to take off warts, an' I grabs the old faker's mitt. He tried to pull away, but Jorge tells him quick to be a good sport, or words to that effeck.

"I hadn't meant to put more'n a drop or so on him; but at the first bite of the stuff he jumped an' hit my wrist an' spilled about half the bottle onto his arm, an' some of it spatters onto his snake, an' it sits right up an' takes notice; an' begins puncturin' him three hundred jabs to the minute; an' right away in a loud an' piercin' voice he called it a day an' went home, with the tail of my shirt flyin' out behind him like the flag on a caboose.

"I switched the acid bottle for one of peppermint essence, an' when Jorge kindly give me his attention again, I took a swig of it an' smacked my lips and clicked my teeth, an' Joe tells me my rep is made as a medicine-man, an' I can have the other bozo's job if I want it.

"That afternoon I went to see Jorge again, an' all our guns was standin' in a row in his front parlor, an' Jorge had Joe ast me to show him how to make 'em talk, which I said I would some day when conditions was right, an' I got a rag an' some oil an' cleaned the guns.

"NEXT day Jorge come to see me an' wanted to know what everything was in my duffel-bag, bein' one of the curiousest old guys you ever seen.

"I give him a taste of the peppermint essence, havin' Joe tell him that it wouldn't hurt my friends, but would burn the insides outta anybody that was meanin' to do me dirt; an' right then I seen from the way he took it down that I stood pretty good with Jorge. He was as innocent as a child in some ways, but in others he was sharper than a Third Avenue pawnbroker.

"We was all ace-high in Jorge's town, an' I seen some odd things there, includin' a weddin', which I won't give you the perticklers of, they was that scandalous. Jorge offered me the pick of his girls in case I was needin' a wife or so, but I says no, that I has one at home, an' I guess he understood.

"ONE day I got an idea. Among other habits I seen them Aguarunas was born gamblers. They played a game by tossin' pieces of bone into a hole in the ground, an' they was as bugs on it as a Chink on fan-tan. Jorge was as big a nut as any of 'em when the bones was rattlin', an' he'd bet his shirt any day if he'd had one. Why, they even bet their wives when the play was runnin' high, till the social statistics of the town was worse tangled than they are along Fifth Avenue.

"Among my traps I had a set of dice which I'd took along to while away a few idle an' profitable hours on the steamer, an' one day I sprung 'em on Jorge an' started learnin' him to roll 'em. I figured crap was too deep for his intelleck, so I learned him poker dice, an' he took to it like a duck to a puddle.

"HE WAS kinda slow at first, 'cause he done his counthin' on is fingers an' toes, an' thought I done the same, an' as he had two toes missin' it bothered him sometimes to keep his tally. He figured that I had the advantage of him, an' so I did, but it wasn't in my toes.

"Pretty soon, though, Jorge thought he knew all there was to poker dice, an' he wanted to play for somethin', an' I was agreeable.

"The Indian style of play suited my schemes to a T. They didn't cover stakes—I mean one of 'em would set up somethin', mebbe a jagger tooth or mebbe a dog, an' they'd shoot for it. Whoever'd win would set up the next stake, an' the loser had the privilege of namin' it, an' if the winner wasn't game to shoot, why, he'd have to pony up what he'd won on the first shot.

"Not to seem too anxious, I named a day when me an' Jorge would play for keeps, an' when the mornin' come I told Silver Joe an' Enrique to pack our duds, an' after breakfast me an' Joe went over to Jorge's place.

"Now, barrin' flukes, which is libel in the best regulated families, Jorge, when it come to poker dice, was like an infant in my hands, but I never let him think so. My intention was to let the old chap win, good an' plenty—an' in the meantime your Uncle Billy was goin' to cop a few necessaries. Jorge had it from me, too, an' understood it, that in case of fives rollin' out, any five would tie, one flop to roll off the tie.

"We tossed up for the privilege of namin' the first stake, an' Jorge won, an' right away named somethin' which I couldn't get back if I wanted to, it bein' that I was to show him how to make the guns talk. I says O. K. an' Jorge squats alongside of a tanned jagger's hide on the floor an' shoots out the dice.

"Right away I seen the dice was goin' to run high, for Jorge pitches sixes full of trays his first flop, an' after pullin' on his fingers an' toes an' eyin' me pretty hard, he decides to leave it lay. I chucks aces an' deuces in three flops, an' Jorge cackles an' tells Joe to fetch a gun.

"I slipped in a ca'tridge an' cocked the gun an' got him an' it pointed outta the door in the general direction of the sky an' showed him what the trigger was for an' how to shut one eye. But he got nervous an' shut both, an' the gun wabbled a lot an' went off, but didn't do nothin' worse than wake up the whole village an' kill a dog that happened to be amblin' in front of the gate.

"I picked up the gun an' shook Jorge's hand, which was shakin' anyhow, an' has Joe tell him what a fine shot he was, an' Jorge believes it an' swells up his chest an' has the dog brought in so's he can see the hole in it an' show it to his wives an' the neighbors.

"In fact he was so tickled with his stunt that I was scared it'd be all off with the bones for the day, 'cause he begun to tell what he'd do when he went huntin'—which I made up my mind that if he invited me, I'd be sick or climb a tree. But in the end the gamblin' fever had him, an' he laid the gun under his hams, an' with the dead dog layin' where he could look at it once in a while, he said he was ready to go on, an' what was I goin' to shoot for.

"Though they'd furnished me with the dirty end of the stick, sendin' me down to Brazil, they prob'ly hadn't an idea what I was goin' up against, so I'd figured that I still owed a duty to the B. & A. Rubber Co. So I had Joe tell Jorge that I'd roll him for the privilege of the company's men to take rubber outta his swamps without bein' manhandled. Of course, I knew the land belonged to the government, but it was a long ways off, an' old Jorge was right on the job.

"It took a time for Jorge to get the idea, a few thousand acres of rubber land not meanin' nothin' in his young life, but finally his face cleared up an' he says it's a go.

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"He rolls back as winner, but the best he done in three flops was three fours, which I win with three sixes, not to show too much strength.

"THE game went on sort of fifty-fifty; though Jorge by one of them flukes did set me back for somethin' that I wanted bad, which was my watch. But I had to be a sport, an' show him how to wind it, an' he hung it round his neck, an' every once in a while he'd hold it to his ear to see if the little devil in it was workin'.

"Well, Jorge won what I've said, an' my bottle of peppermint an' a lookin'-glass an' two of the three guns an' a box of matches an' a couple of blankets an' a safety razor. An' I win Silver Joe an' Enrique an' the other gun an' my .45 automatic an' a necklace of jagger's teeth, an' that pup Pedro, which I wasn't finished with yet.

"After a while I'd win about everything I wanted but one thing which was quite important, seein' it was me. I'd kept studyin' Jorge, an' I seen he was pretty well satisfied that he'd had the long end of it so far, an', things standin' so, I decided the time had arrived to make a touch off'n fortune as Shakespeare had remarked.

"So I took off'n my hip a half-pint that I'd cherished ever since we left Rio, in case of snake-bite, an' I has Joe tell Jorge that he'd been such a sport an' gentleman that I was goin' to give him the treat of his life, which was a swig of the white man's courage. I took a small peg myself an' handed the flask to Jorge, an' he took an awful pull at it, an' begun to choke.

"For a minute I was worried, an' then I seen a look of pleasure chase a look of pain acrost his wrinkled old map, an' he rubbed his belly an' quit wheezin', an' come to another clinch with the flask, which he didn't hand back, but set it down beside him an' kept his hand on it. What would we roll for next? he ast.

"In his eyes I seen that the courage was gettin' in its work, an' I says to Joe to tell him that the next stake would be our passports outta his country, an'—this bein' an inspiration of the minute—that I was goin' to fix up a swell consolation prize in case he lost.

"If it hadn't been for the half-pint I don't think Jorge would ever of risked partin' with me, 'cause I'd furnished him with lots of innocent amusement, an' we'd got, so to speak, to be pretty good pals. He thought it over an' shook his head, an' took a couple of more pulls at the flask, an' finally he grabbed up the dice with a grunt an' chucked 'em out.

"When he was done, which was some time, 'cause he couldn't make his count very good—I s'pose beginnin' to see more fingers an' toes than he really had—there was three fives an' a pair of aces stood between me an' the freedom of the forests, an' I won with four deuces.

"Jorge groaned when he counted 'em, an' quick I has Joe get his mind onto the consolation prize, an' tell him to open his mouth an' shut his eyes. He done it, an', not without a twist of regret, I hauled out both my plates of store teeth an' stuck 'em in his mouth an' held up the lookin'-glass, an' Joe tells him to look.

"Say, Jorge was that tickled that it was worth the teeth to see it. He snaps 'em together once or twict like he was afraid they wasn't real, an' quick he sends one of his wives runnin' for a hunk of meat an' he sinks my grinders into it, an' then he turns to me with tears shinin' in his eyes—though I don't know whether it was the effecks of the half-pint, or sorrow at losin' me, or the untamed joy of a poor bozo that for ten years or so hadn't been able to chew nothin' tougher than gravy.

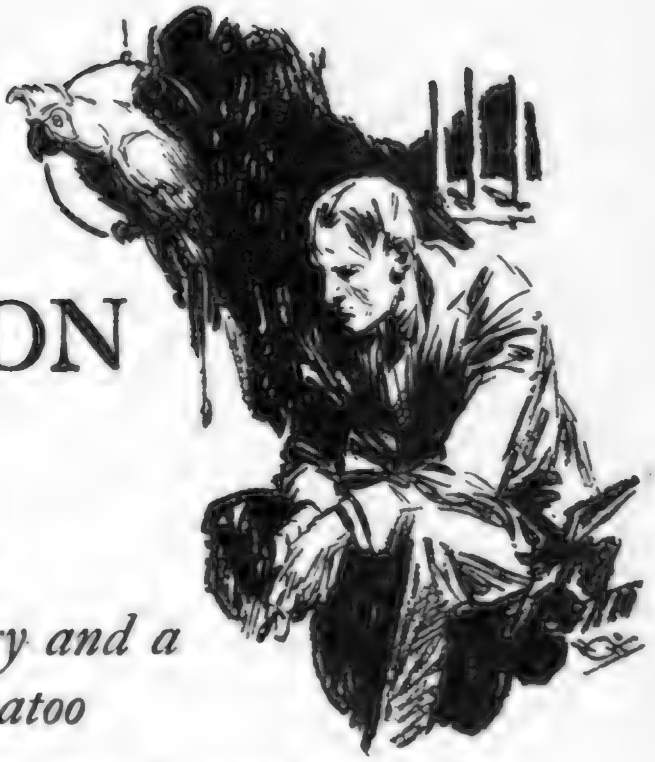
"But old Jorge was a gentleman. He'd give his word an' he kept it. He give the orders that let us out, an' he said good-by an' that he'd be pleased to go a piece with us, but he's awful sleepy an' will we excuse him, or words to that effeck; an' he rolls over onto his jagger hide an' begins snorin' like a bagpipe.

"So we marches out of Jorgetown, an' presently I gives a gun to Silver Joe an' tells him that me an' Enrique will wait for him an' Pedro a piece farther on, an' in a few minutes I heard a shot, an' I knows we don't have to wait none for Pedro.

"We finds the river an' our house-scow, an' we gets back down to Rio, Enrique goin' with us, which I later fixes it so's the government gives him a medal instead of hangin' him.

"I gets new store teeth in Rio, an' comes back to New York with everything all set for the B. & A. Rubber Co., which I finds was mostly a paper company, an' had gone busted while I was away."

The Pigeon on the Sill



Murder and Mystery and a Screeching Cockatoo

By Herman Landon

"IF YOU want solitude," said Major Briggs, stroking a mustache whose crispness had survived his active military career, "you ought to try Cedar Cove. The place aches with solitude. I ought to know. Stuck it out for six summers."

Thomas Maurice Webb wanted particulars. Major Briggs swallowed a pepsin tablet and expatiated deprecatingly on the secluded character of Cedar Cove.

"If unmitigated isolation is what you want," he concluded, "the place is yours for as long as you can stand it. As for me, though, I wouldn't be found dead in a place like that."

So it came about that Thomas Maurice Webb gathered together a few necessities, including Madam Katoo and his priceless man Knobbetts, and went out to a rock-strewn and unlovely section of shore front to write his "Memoirs Of A Diplomat." It did not occur to him that there might have been an unconscious note of prophecy in the major's adverse comment on Cedar Cove as a place in which to be found dead. His digestion was excellent, his heart sound, his blood pressure normal, and his only apparent worry was a stepson who was going to the devil as fast as legs could carry him. Moreover, his chief reason, although not his ostensible one, for going to Cedar Cove was that he did not wish to be found dead for a long time yet.

He looked a little frail, yet he was a man of much dignity. You could easily picture him in silk knee-breeches and other court trappings, comporting himself with utmost ease while being received in audience by a majesty. Strong features, an erect bearing, gray hair that looked as if it had been combed in anger, a bit of swagger and a touch of arrogance combined to give him a distinguished air. The cool and deliberate nature of great minds was his. Anecdotes gathered about his personality like moths about a bright light, some of them true, all of them believable. It was related, for instance, that one dark night, while recuperating at a watering place in Florida, he had been accosted by a footpad on a dark highway.

"Please don't shoot," Mr. Webb had said. "I am here for my health."

The footpad, governed by Heaven only knew what mysterious sentiments, had slunk away. Mr. Webb, still in possession of his watch and wallet, had continued his stroll. His heart might have jostled his Adam's apple for a minute, but nobody knew that part of the story.

NEITHER did anybody know that Mr. Webb slid an old army revolver into the double bottom of one of the bags after Knobbetts had packed his luggage preparatory to their departure for Cedar Cove. Arrived there, he kept it in his desk by day and under his pillow at night. Neither did Knobbetts know how carefully his master had guarded the secret of their destination so that only Major Briggs knew their whereabouts. It did not occur to him that their arrival at Cedar Cove coincided almost to a day with Jimmie Garrett's release from the penitentiary. And there were many other things Knobbetts did not know. His master's habit, for instance, of examining the fastenings of doors and windows late at night, long after his supposed retirement. And the even more astonishing custom of always looking under the bed before he crawled in between the sheets. It was by such secrecy that Thomas Maurice Webb remained a hero to his valet.

He had his eccentricities, of course. Knobbetts understood all great men had them. He was a hard man, severe and domineering and inexorably just in matters of wrong doing, yet it was this same Thomas Maurice Webb who had picked up a maimed kitten on the street one day and nursed it back to health. A man of contradictions, certainly. And Knobbetts knew only half of it.

Madam Katoo, had there been a reasoning brain beneath her russet crest, might have got an inkling of the other half. Perhaps she would have indulged in a derisive cackle or two upon learning that Thomas Maurice Webb was a fraud and a poser. She was alone with him at night, saw him pace the floor with his nervous strut, saw him look under the bed and into the clothes-closet, heard him mumble to himself occasionally; and she might have deduced that he was afflicted with such a morbid dread of loneliness that even a cockatoo offered agreeable company. A dog would have seemed a more natural companion for a lonely man, but the trouble with dogs was that they understood too much. You couldn't fool them very well. They knew by instinct whether a man was as composed and intrepid as he tried to appear, or a coward at heart.

It was Madam Katoo who, in the evening of the day following their arrival at Cedar Cove, got a glimpse of Mr. Webb's hidden self as he sat reading a newspaper in his improvised study. The house in its entirety was of noble lines and dimensions for a summer dwelling and showed many traces of former dignity, but the ground-floor room in which Mr. Webb sat was narrow and low-ceiled, with many sprawling cracks in the wall plaster and furnished only with a desk, two chairs, Madam Katoo's cage and a bad picture of a young woman dipping water from a stream. The desk was in the center, beneath a hanging oil lamp, and if Mr. Webb should look up and glance out the window he would see only a huge gnarled oak outside and, a few yards beyond it, an old barn that obstructed all further view. Between the barn and the house was a broad driveway of cobblestones which swerved sharply just outside the window and wound up at the front entrance.

AN OBSCURE item of news was absorbing Mr. Webb's attention. It stated that James Garrett, adopted son of Thomas Maurice Webb, whose achievements in the diplomatic service were still fresh in the public mind, had just been released from the penitentiary, his original sentence of seven years for grand larceny having been cut in half by the board of pardons. Asked by a reporter what he intended doing now that he was free again, Garrett had made facetious reply.

"Oh, I crave a bit of excitement after being walled in so long. Maybe I'll go tiger hunting for a while."

Just a bit of flippancy, to all appearances. Thousands who read the item would see nothing else in the statement. But Mr. Webb's mind turned back a number of years, to the time when Jimmie had nicknamed him Old Tiger. That was before Jimmie had started to turn out bad. Afterward he had spurned his stepfather's discipline along with his name. By quick stages the young scrapegrace had gone from bad to worse, and from worse to prison. It was partly due to Mr. Webb's stern sense of justice that he had gone there. Jimmie's

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last words to him before they took him away had been:

"Some day I'll get you for this, Old Tiger."

THERE had been a thin blaze of hate in his eyes as he said it. And Mr. Webb imagined there had been a blaze of hate in Jimmie's heart as he made that statement to the reporter. There was a strained look in his face. Yes, he was afraid of Jimmie Garrett. He was afraid of many things, though no living soul suspected it—of the sea, of fires, of motor-cars, of burglars, of the dark, of earthquakes, of pestilence, of poverty and of death. It was rarely he had a moment's peace. Fear in one form or another was always with him. Yet it was a peculiar kind of fear, something that Mr. Webb himself couldn't explain. It didn't seem to come from any tangible menaces. The thing he feared most seemed to be fear itself, something that shook and shamed him even while he fought against it.

It was so with respect to Jimmie Garrett. He did not fear violence or death at Jimmie's hands, but he feared he would not be able to look death in the face without quavers. Something like that, anyhow. That was why, on the pretext that he needed solitude to write his memoirs, he had gone into hiding at Cedar Cove. Gone into hiding! He smiled ironically. That was the humiliating truth, suspected by no man, not even by Knobbetts, who was a faithful and versatile sort and invaulable in a place like this, even though Mr. Webb suspected that he sometimes made faces behind his back.

"Hello, Tom."

The screechy salutation made Mr. Webb start sharply. Madam Katoo was one of the few living beings in the habit of addressing him so familiarly. He looked about him with bewilderment. The cage was empty and the door stood ajar. Madam Katoo herself, her bright crest and gray plumage vivified by the rays of the setting sun, sat pertly on a limb of the oak just outside the window, viewing the former diplomat with a dapper and roguish mien. At once he understood what had happened. The fastenings of the cage door must have given way to continuous strain.

"Come here," he directed sternly. "Come here instantly."

"Go to hell," said Madam Katoo.

Mr. Webb frowned. He suspected Knobbetts had added that forceful phrase to the cockatoo's scant vocabulary. He coaxed and bullied, but the bird was obstinate. The world was hers, and she knew it. But as soon as the former diplomat had exhausted all his diplomacy she flew demurely back to her cage.

WHEN Knobbetts called him to dinner a few minutes later, Mr. Webb was once more his composed and imperturbable self. In the days that followed he devoted himself with greater energy to his memoirs The beneficent effects of the simple life told in clearer eyes and steadier nerves. Even Madam Katoo, now at liberty to roam at her pleasure between the cage and the oak, since she had demonstrated that she had no great wanderlust, might have remarked that his secret worries seemed to be departing. After all, Mr. Webb sometimes reflected, it was extremely unlikely that Jimmie Garrett would find him here.

But one afternoon Knobbetts brought disturbing tidings. A tramp of decidedly unfavorable aspect had invaded their privacy. The vagabond had spent last night in the barn, and now he was sunning himself on a near-by ledge of rock.

"Why don't you tell him to move on?" asked Mr. Webb.

"I did, sir, but he won't."

Mr. Webb glanced involuntarily at the desk drawer that contained his revolver. Then he looked down at his manuscript. A tiny drop of ink had fallen on a half-written page. He blotted it deliberately.

"What does he look like?" he inquired casually.

Knobbetts' description, dealing most with dirt and tatters, was unsatisfactory. Dirt and tatters might hide a Jimmie Garrett. Mr. Webb tried to view the problem with diplomatic calm.

"Feed him and put him to work sawing wood," he directed. "He can sleep in the barn."

Knobbetts summoned courage to voice a gentle protest.

"If you don't mind my saying so—"

"I do," said Mr. Webb sharply.

Knobbetts withdrew. Mr. Webb congratulated himself upon a wise decision. He looked out the window, and soon he saw

Knobbetts conduct the tramp toward the wood pile behind the barn. He tried in vain to catch a glimpse of the fellow's face. In a few minutes, however, he heard a series of strident sounds. The tramp had gone to work with the saw. Mr. Webb's little test had succeeded. It was impossible to imagine Jimmie Garrett at work with a saw. The fellow must be just a casual tramp.

But misgivings arose anew when, the following day, Knobbetts reported that the tramp was suffering severely from blisters on his hands.

"Blisters?" said Mr. Webb. A tramp with blisters on his hands? It seemed a bit incongruous. He thought of Jimmie Garrett again. Jimmie's hands would blister very quickly if, by a violent stretch of the imagination, one could imagine him sawing wood.

"Give him a pair of gloves," he directed.

"There's only one pair in the house, sir, the ones you bought before you left town. They're too good for a tramp to wear."

"Then give him a dollar and tell him to walk to the village and buy a pair."

"A dollar, sir?" Knobbetts' frugal soul was in revolt. He looked very much as if he would have preferred to put the dollar in his own pocket. "You can get a good pair of cotton gloves for fifteen cents, sir."

Mr. Webb considered. He was very anxious to inspect the tramp. In the end he dismissed Knobbetts and went himself to the wood-pile behind the barn. The tramp sat on a log and looked at his hands with a pained air. He wore a thick stubble of beard, but even if it had been twice as thick a glance would have told Mr. Webb that he had alarmed himself in vain.

His relief rendered him extravagant. He peeled a two-dollar bill from a roll, told the tramp to get himself a pair of gloves, adding that he could keep the change.

Then he returned to his desk and was soon absorbed in his work. He scarcely heard Knobbetts coax the old flivver into activity and start on his daily trip to the village for mail and provisions. The hours passed quickly. Noon came, but Knobbetts did not return. Perhaps the flivver, an old rattletrap affair that belonged on the premises, had broken down. Mr. Webb was getting hungry, but he tried to recapture his thoughts and go on with his work.

HIS thoughts flowed slowly and with interruptions. Soon his pen paused in the middle of a sentence. Three o'clock struck, and still no Knobbetts. Mr. Webb's nerves were on edge. He wondered whether the tramp had returned from his trip to the village. With Knobbetts gone, a strange and oppressive feeling seemed to brood over the lonely house. The air was stifling, with an electric quality in it, as if a storm were on the way. Madam Katoo sat very still in her cage, as if she too felt the depressing influence.

Mr. Webb opened the window, glanced up at a sullen sky, crossed the room a few times, then stopped suddenly at the desk and looked down at the sentence he had left unfinished. Though his eyes were on the writing, he was listening to sounds coming from the outside. There were footsteps, and they had a furtive and disagreeable sound. With a flutter of plumage and a screechy complaint Madam Katoo flew from her cage and perched on a limb of the oak outside. Mr. Webb stood motionless, listening, little tremors jogging up and down his spine.

The footsteps drew nearer. Madam Katoo uttered a few muffled squawks. Still Mr. Webb stood looking down at the unfinished sentence. There was a tightness at his throat, a hammering at his ribs. His hand shook a trifle as he opened the drawer and saw that the revolver was still there.

Now the footfalls were quite close. A shadowy form passed hurriedly in front of the window.

"Jimmie!" came Madam Katoo's screech from her perch in the oak. "Dam' loafer!"

The raucous call rasped on Mr. Webb's taut nerves. Madam Katoo remembered, even after these three and a half years. For days now Jimmie's name would be on her sharp tongue.

Mr. Webb heard the outer door swing on its rusty hinges and close with a slam. He leaned weakly against the desk, trying to still the tremors of his body and control the fear which he dreaded even more than Jimmie Garrett's vengeance.

Footsteps approached the door, then stopped. There came a fearful pause. Mr. Webb sat down in the chair beside the desk. Why was Jimmie Garrett delaying? Deliberating his mode of attack, perhaps. He stifled an impulse to run. It would be useless, for Jimmie Garrett could run faster.

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Besides, the impulse to run was a thing of reason only; it didn't come from his heart. He did not want to run away. The moments dragged. A fierce resolution came, smothering all else. Whatever was to happen, he must meet it with the same fraudulent calm—a sort of self-hypnotism it was—with which he had faced dangers in the past.

A hand was fumbling at the knob outside. Mr. Webb straightened up and took the pen in his hand. It shook between his fingers. He threw all the tattered remnants of his nerve force into the shaking hand. The tremors lessened; now the hand was steady. His lips formed a tight smile as he gazed at the now unwavering pen. It was a triumph of mind over quaking body, and it filled him with a grim exaltation.

The door came open. A moment longer he gazed at the pen in his hand. Not the slightest tremor now. The sight gave him added fortitude. He dipped the pen in ink, bent his head over the manuscript, gazed down at the unfinished sentence.

JIMMIE GARRETT, tall, lean, disheveled, with a pallid strain in his face, stood in the opening. With a smolder in narrowed eyes he looked at the man seated at the desk, the gray head inclined over a sheet of paper, pen poised over his writing.

Mr. Webb looked up. Every nerve and every muscle was taut with a terrific strain, but all Jimmie Garrett saw was a look of mild surprise.

"Oh, you, Jimmie."

The voice was steady. Jimmie Garrett saw no sign of the struggle that rendered it so. Perhaps he had hoped his entrance would create a dramatic surprise. With a look of spite and chagrin he opened his coat, took a small packet from an inner pocket and flung it contemptuously on the desk.

Mr. Webb picked it up, looked at it, fixed an uncomprehending gaze on Jimmie Garrett.

"Money?"

Jimmie Garrett tossed a few silver coins and two coppers on the desk.

"Seven hundred sixty-four dollars and seven cents," he said.

"Oh!" Mr. Webb was frankly surprised now. "That's the amount you took."

"With interest," said Jimmie Garrett shortly.

Mr. Webb nodded. He counted the money deliberately. His face was a little pale, but his hand showed no quiver as he raked the bills and coins into a drawer.

"You surprise me, Jimmie," he remarked.

Jimmie Garrett shrugged. The sneer on his lips grew more pronounced. The other's apparent composure seemed to bewilder and infuriate him.

"I told you I would return the money," he declared. "I've done it. We are even—as far as the money is concerned."

Mr. Webb nodded matter-of-factly, although the implied threat did not escape him.

"May I inquire where you got it, Jimmie?"

"Borrowed it from a friend. I'd rather be in his debt than in yours."

Mr. Webb searched his face. He recalled that Jimmie had never lied, no matter what else he had done. The young man's eyes were steady despite the smolder that trembled in their depths.

"As you know," said Mr. Webb evenly, "I didn't care about the money. That didn't mean anything. What hurt me was that you had stooped to thievery."

"Hurt you?" Jimmie Garrett's jeering laugh was loud and hoarse. "Hurt you? Why, you have no more human feeling than a buzzard. You threw me in jail over a few hundred dollars."

"It was the law, Jimmie, not I."

"You could have stopped it."

"If you had come to me and confessed, perhaps. I turned the case over to a detective agency. They discovered the truth. Then there was nothing to do but let the law take its course. Your term in prison seems to have done you good."

Again Jimmie Garrett's bitter laugh rang out.

"Yes, it has done you good," Mr. Webb insisted. "Once I thought your pride and your sense of decency were dead. Prison life seems to have revived them. You have proved that by returning the money you stole."

"Oh, don't preach!" Jimmie Garrett snarled. "It makes me sick to hear you. I wouldn't have touched your rotten money if I hadn't been drinking and if I hadn't been in the damnedest pinch a man was ever in. Anyway, I'd rather steal than be a frost-bitten old mountebank like you."

Mr. Webb quavered beneath his placid

exterior. By returning the money Jimmie Garrett had thrown him into a confusion more demoralizing than fear. He had expected a different sort of scene. This was even more disturbing than open violence. But it would not do to let the young man glimpse the tumult within him. He must hang on to his make-believe imperturbability.

"At any rate," he said without a tremor, "you have proven yourself a man by returning the money. Come and see me at my office when I return to the city. Perhaps we can arrange something. In the meantime, if you need money—"

"I don't."

"Very well, then." Mr. Webb dipped his pen and bent his head over the manuscript. He struck a pose of mental absorption, and he knew it was well done. Now he ran his eyes over the paragraph ending in the unfinished sentence. To complete it with Jimmie Garrett standing there, looking down at him out of his inflamed eyes, would be something of a triumph, a gesture of derision at the horde of fears snapping at his nerves.

HE BROUGHT his pen to the paper, but the thoughts would not come. Jimmie Garrett's presence was distracting. His silence grew to be maddening. Mr. Webb could stand it no longer. He looked up, then looked quickly down again. What was the meaning of that awful look he had seen in Jimmie Garrett's face? Murder?

His fingers cramped convulsively about the pen. In a moment he had recaptured his spurious calm; the twitching of his fingers ceased. He must erase from his mind the look he had seen in Jimmie Garrett's face. Again he fixed his eyes on the unfinished sentence. He must write something—anything. But what he wrote bore no relation to what went before.

> My adopted son, James Garrett, is here," were the words that fell with surprising smoothness from his pen. "He is in an ugly mood. I believe he contemplates doing me bodily harm.

His pen paused. A faint smile twitched his lips. Jimmie Garrett could not know what he had written. If the worst should come to pass, if the passion he had seen in Jimmie Garrett's face should explode in an act of murder, then these lines would tell their own story. And people would say that Thomas Maurice Webb had been a hero indeed. They would praise his iron composure. A man who could indite an accusation against his slayer even while looking death in the face.

A faint chuckle escaped him. They would never guess what a charlatan he had been. And then a dynamic strain in the atmosphere compelled him to look up again. It was growing dark. There were mutters of thunder in the distance. Not for more than a second could he trust himself to look into Jimmie Garrett's terrible face. Then he reached into the drawer, took out the revolver and placed it at his elbow. He steadied his hand, then wrote:

> I am armed. My weapon lies at my elbow. I hope it will act as a deterrent—

The pen came to a rasping pause. His arm darted out, but it was too late. Jimmie Garrett had flung himself across the desk and snatched the pistol. Looking up, Mr. Webb saw his stepson's face distorted by a horrible grimace. He heard a laugh. Then a small, awful pause. And then a thunderous crack.

II

"BUT the cockatoo, Jimmie?" said Mr. Dakin.

"Yes, the cockatoo," said Jimmie Garrett, hopelessly.

He looked gloomily about the iron-grilled enclosure in which he sat on a hard bench with his attorney in the Fairfield County jail. Mr. Dakin was a broad, tall man with a soft voice and a soft manner. He was slow of speech and movement, and he looked far from brilliant. Jimmie was drawn to him, but he did not know exactly why. Perhaps one reason was that Mr. Dakin believed him, while other lawyers had listened to him with cold incredulity.

"If we could explain what became of the cockatoo," said Mr. Dakin wistfully, "we might convince them that the rest of your story is true. We could make them believe that you went to Cedar Cove that afternoon with no other thought than to throw the money in Mr. Webb's face and tell him what you thought of him."

"It's true," declared Jimmie quietly.

"I know it, and that's the devil of it. Nothing is so hard to make a jury believe as the truth. If it wasn't for the pesky cockatoo we could—"

"And the bullet," Jimmie put in.

"Yes, and the bullet," said Mr. Dakin.

He paused before his client, legs spread wide apart, filling his pipe with white, pudgy fingers. His suit of mousey gray fitted badly. His face was large and soft and sallow. By rigid economy a single lock of hair had been made to cover a goodly portion of skull.

"If we could find the cockatoo and the bullet," he added plaintively, "then we might make the jury swallow the rest."

Jimmie nodded heavily.

"This is how your story will sound," said Mr. Dakin. "You thought Mr. Webb gave you a raw deal. You brooded over it in prison. That part was all right. He was a bit rough with you. A lot of people will sympathize with you there. When you got out of prison you were like a boiler with its exhaust pipe plugged up. You had to blow off steam or bust. That's all right, too. Anybody can see you're hot-headed. You learned where your step-father was located by going over Major Brigg's outgoing mail one day and finding a letter bearing Mr. Webb's forwarding address. Then you went to a friend and borrowed eight hundred dollars. You wanted to pay Mr. Webb back before you bawled him out. That's a good touch, Jimmie—about paying back the money. Up to that point your story will get across beautifully."

Mr. Dakin blew smoke through the bars of the iron enclosure.

"But the rest—" He wrinkled his long, florid nose, the only bright feature of his countenance. "The rest is all snags. You found Mr. Webb at his desk. Knobbetts was out. You threw the money down on the desk. A lot of red-hot phrases were blistering the lining of your brain, but you couldn't get 'em out. You were too mad. And the sight of Mr. Webb sitting there as calm as a judge made you all the madder. You wanted to see him wilt and shake, but he didn't even bat an eyelid. He just went on writing as unconcerned as if you hadn't been there. Cool, I'll tell the world! And his coolness made you all the hotter. You wanted to batter down his iron composure, but you couldn't even make a dent in it. It made you furious. You lost control of yourself. You grabbed the revolver and fired a shot, just to see if you couldn't make him jump. But you didn't fire the shot at him. You fired it— Think hard, Jimmie. Where did you fire it?"

JIMMIE GARRETT raised his head, a well-formed young head covered with thick yellow hair. His pale face grew taut with the strain of looking back upon a scene of tumult.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "It happened so quickly, and I must have been a little mad. But I didn't fire the shot at Mr. Webb. I can swear to that. I seemed to come partly to my senses when I heard the explosion. I ran from the house, fearing I might be tempted to shoot again and—and—"

"And take aim, the second time," Mr. Dakin suggested.

"Yes, something like that. I couldn't trust myself. I just ran like mad, without stopping to look back."

"And you dropped the revolver as you ran?"

"I'm not sure." Jimmie pondered heavily. "I—it seems I threw the revolver out the window just after I fired the shot. But I'm not sure. It all seems like a crazy dream."

"And half an hour later," Mr. Dakin recited, hitching up his sagging trousers, "Knobbetts came home and found Mr. Webb dead on the floor. The revolver, with your finger-prints on the handle and showing that one shot had been recently fired from it, was found outside the window. The cockatoo was gone. The money had disappeared from the desk drawer. On the desk was a sheet of paper in Mr. Webb's handwriting saying you had come to him in an ugly mood, and that he feared you were after his life." He made a wry face. "It makes a nice little case for the State."

"Yes," said Jimmie, "and my precious record makes it all the blacker."

"The State will contend," said Mr. Dakin, "that you made away with the cockatoo because she recognized you and you were afraid she would talk. I understand that cockatoo would harp on a person's name for days after she'd seen him. She did recognize you, didn't she?"

"I believe so. I have a faint recollection that she spoke my name as I passed the window."

Mr. Dakin nodded gloomily. "That's

where we are up against a hard one. You and I believe that a stranger—maybe the tramp Mr. Webb hired to saw wood—committed the murder soon after you left and took the money. It must have been very soon after, or Mr. Webb would have torn up what he wrote about you. But a stranger would have no motive for doing away with the cockatoo. Not unless he did it with the deliberate intention of throwing the guilt on you."

He sighed. It couldn't be said that Mr. Dakin was bubbling over with cheer. Yet he was not a pessimist. On the contrary, as Jimmie had learned, he was the sort of optimist who has to see the full extent of the gloomy side before he can turn to the bright one.

"Then there is the bullet," he went on. "A bullet was found in Mr. Webb's body. The State will contend that you fired it. We've got to admit that you fired a shot from Mr. Webb's revolver. There's no getting around that. But we deny that the shot you fired was the fatal one. Now, to uphold our contention, we've got to show what became of the bullet you fired. If it didn't lodge in Mr. Webb's body, it must have lodged somewhere else."

JIMMIE stretched his legs and frowned. Time after time he had gone over this point with Mr. Dakin, but it was as baffling as ever.

"I've searched the room in which Mr. Webb was killed," added Mr. Dakin, "and so has the district attorney. There is no sign of a bullet anywhere. That leaves only one explanation. You must have fired the bullet out the window."

"Maybe I did," said Jimmie dully.

"Very probable," said Mr. Dakin. "You threw the revolver out the window. Very likely you fired the bullet in the same direction. We know the window was open that night. But now we come to another snag. It's a narrow window, and you were standing about six feet from it when you fired the shot. That didn't give the bullet a very wide range. I spent all yesterday afternoon experimenting, firing about a hundred shots from an air pistol. I stood exactly where you stood. When I aimed low, they struck the wide cobblestoned driveway that runs between the barn and the house. When I aimed high, they struck the eaves of the barn. Whichever way I fired, it was impossible to shoot beyond the barn. So the bullet you fired that night couldn't have gone very far. Yet I searched the entire range and didn't find even a scratch."

With a fretting air he puffed smoke from his pipe.

"There's the riddle," he concluded. "The bullet couldn't strike either the oak, the cobblestones or the barn without leaving a trace. Neither could it have dissolved in thin air. What became of it?"

"It's three weeks since it was fired," Jimmie observed. "A lot of things could have happened to it in the meantime."

"But the house and grounds were searched five hours after the murder," Mr. Dakin reminded him. "How carefully we don't know. Wish I had been on the case then. But one thing is sure. We've got to find either the cockatoo or the bullet. Both would be better. Without either we're lost."

Jimmie flung his cigaret away. It passed between the iron bars and landed in a brass cuspidor outside.

"Good shot," said Mr. Dakin.

HE LOWERED his head in thought. Minutes passed in silence. A weary jail attendant came down the corridor with a stack of cuspidors under his arm. He carried away the one in which Jimmie's cigaret had fallen. Mr. Dakin followed him with heavy eyes until he was out of sight. Then he fixed the same heavy eyes on the point where the cuspidor had been.

"That's an idea," he mumbled absently.

Jimmie watched him curiously. Mr. Dakin turned slowly and looked at him. His eyes were narrow and contemplative.

"My mind works that way, Jimmie," he explained. "I see things that are farthest from my thoughts, and they start queer ideas in my brain. That cigaret now. You shot it straight into the cuspidor. But it isn't there now. It's gone."

Jimmie gave him a blank look. Mr. Dakin seemed to be stating the obvious thing with a very solemn air.

"It's far-fetched," he added, "but maybe the same thing happened to the bullet. You see, it's possible that your bullet lodged in some object that was afterward taken away, just as the cuspidor was taken away. It's just a hunch. But it would explain what became of the bullet."

"But it wouldn't explain what happened to the cockatoo or the money."

"No, it wouldn't. Might be worth thinking about, though. See you again tomorrow, Jimmie."

He placed his big, plump hand on Jimmie's shoulder, called the corridor guard, and walked out. Jimmie was taken back to his cell. He was in a lighter mood. It seemed as though the big and gloomy lawyer's touch on his shoulder had banished a load of worries.

When he returned at eleven o'clock the next morning there was a hint of excitement beneath Mr. Dakin's rustic exterior.

"Had another hunch last night," he casually announced. "Saw a man with a limp. It started an idea kicking around in my head."

"A man with a limp?"

"He limped pretty badly. It set me wondering whether a bullet had hit him in the leg or the foot at one time."

"Yes?" said Jimmie. He was growing accustomed to the lawyer's queer way of reasoning.

"That started me thinking about the missing bullet again," said Mr. Dakin. He crushed a leaf of tobacco between his great soft hands and filled his pipe. "I also thought about the tramp Mr. Webb put to work sawing wood. I put the two together—the tramp and the bullet. Or, rather, I put the bullet in the tramp."

"Eh?" said Jimmie, very dazed.

"We know the tramp had been around the house that day," Mr. Dakin explained. "Next morning he was gone. Maybe he was seized with wanderlust when Mr. Webb gave him a dollar. Or maybe that dollar gave him a taste for more dollars. Anyhow, maybe he was watching outside the window and saw you throw the money down on the desk. Maybe the bullet you fired landed in some fleshy part of his body. That frightened him, and he ran away. What's wrong with that?"

"By jove!" Jimmie hoarsely exclaimed. "But in that case, wouldn't the tramp have left a trail of blood?"

"A heavy rain started in the evening," Mr. Dakin pointed out. "It may have washed the blood away. I've notified all the hospitals and all the doctors within fifty miles to see if they have any record of a wounded tramp."

Jimmie's face shone a little, but he was not yet convinced.

"But that wouldn't explain who killed Mr. Webb," he remarked.

"No, but it would tend to prove that you didn't. If your bullet lodged in the tramp's anatomy, it couldn't have killed Mr. Webb."

"And what about the cockatoo?"

"One thing at a time," said Mr. Dakin. He looked a little hurt over his client's failure to embrace the theory with greater enthusiasm. "Had a talk with Knobbetts this morning. It's queer nobody seems to have thought of Knobbetts in connection with this case."

"You don't think he killed Mr. Webb?"

"Well, there is just this about it, Jimmie. The cockatoo disappeared the night of the murder. The only sane explanation is that the murderer made away with her because he was afraid she would squeal on him. As far as we know, there were only three persons at Cedar Cove that night whom the cockatoo knew by name. One of 'em is dead. The other two were Knobbetts and you."

He glanced at his watch. His pudgy face lengthened a little.

"The darned thing has stopped," he announced. "Must have forgotten to wind—"

He paused and gazed down at the dial. "By gosh," he exclaimed.

Jimmie watched him. Something, he knew, had been suggested to Mr. Dakin's mind by the stopping of the timepiece.

"Knobbetts said he thought the timer on the Ford had given out when he was halfway between the village and Cedar Cove," the lawyer mumbled. "Said he walked back to the village and got a new one. But when he got back to the car with it he couldn't get it to run. Something else was evidently the trouble, so he had to leave the Ford in the road and walk home. That's how he explained why he was late returning. Nobody has thought of checking up on him."

Slowly and thoughtfully he wound his watch. That finished, he looked absently at Jimmie.

"Between the tramp and Knobbetts," he said, "we may find the murderer."

IT APPEARED, however, that he had been wrong in this forecast. The doctors and the hospitals had no record of a wounded tramp. Inquiries at the garage substantiated that part of Knobbetts' story having to do with the purchase of a new timer for the Ford. The fate of Madam Katoo remained an unsolved mystery. No trace was found of the bullet. Jimmie could tell from Mr. Dakin's looks and manner that things were going badly.

"Our luck will turn," said the lawyer. "Don't worry."

But their luck had not turned when the case of the State versus James Garrett was called. Things had progressed rapidly, for the grand jury had happened to be in session when the crime occurred and the regular term of the district court had opened soon afterward. Mr. Dakin had fought for delay, but without success. Jimmie, feeling rather overwhelmed, watched the gradual filling of the jury-box and then listened for three and a half days to the presentation of the State's evidence. He heard Knobbetts, one of the prosecution's witnesses, denounce him as a wastrel and a thief. His visit to Cedar Cove and the episode in Mr. Webb's study were emphasized in the most damaging manner. He could see the jury seize eagerly upon the two circumstances of the missing cockatoo and the bullet. These were things that appealed to their imagination.

"They're eating it up," remarked Mr. Dakin during a recess. "It's all circumstantial, of course, but—" He rubbed his long, bright nose and looked down at his notes.

Against his protest the jurors were taken out to Cedar Cove to visit the scene of the crime and see for themselves how impossible it would have been for the defendant to fire a bullet in such a manner that no trace of it could be found. Mr. Baines, the district attorney, a small man with an astounding pompadour and ferocious eyes, looked well pleased after the expedition.

Jimmie, called to the stand by his attorney, felt a little overawed at first, with the unfriendly eyes of twelve good men and true upon him. His eyes would stray occasionally to exhibit number one, the revolver that had ended his stepfather's life, and which was now lying in plain sight on the table just below the judge's bench. But Mr. Dakin knew how to make him feel at ease. By and by he could look the jurors straight in the eyes, as he had been counseled to do. Under the big man's soft-voiced questions he related how, in prison, he had brooded over his stepfather's harsh treatment, how resentment and hate had sprung up within him, and how he had looked forward to the day when he could go to Mr. Webb and ease his pent-up rancor by flinging the stolen money in his stepfather's face and pouring red-hot words on his head.

Mr. Dakin questioned him at length upon his mood when he left prison—a foolish mood, but a very human one. He brought out how Jimmie had gone to a friend and borrowed money with which to repay what he had stolen. At the end of the long examination, Jimmie felt that much had been gained. The jurors looked less hostile. Even juror number seven, who for a time had listened with an expression of sour incredulity, seemed impressed.

"You may have the witness," said Mr. Dakin to the district attorney.

LIKE an impatient bull pup suddenly unleashed, Mr. Baines jumped to his feet. His pompadour waggled as he strode menacingly toward the witness. He snatched up exhibit number one and held it close to Jimmie's eyes.

"Garrett, you held this revolver in your hand the night your stepfather was murdered?"

"I did," said Jimmie frankly, having been counseled to speak with candor in matters beyond dispute.

"You threatened him with it?"

"I tried to frighten him."

"You fired a shot from it?"

"That's true."

"Yet you have denied under oath that you shot your stepfather. If you didn't will you explain to the jury what became of the bullet?"

"I can't."

"You know that the scene of the crime, as well as the ground outside the window, was searched a few hours after the murder?"

"So I have been told."

"And that no bullet was found, or any trace of a bullet?"

"So I understand."

"Well, then"—Mr. Baines ran his fingers through his pompadour and paused briefly for rhetorical effect—"can you explain in any convincing manner how a bullet fired under such circumstances, and from the position you occupied when you fired it, could disappear completely?"

"No, I can't."

Mr. Baines paused to let the answer sink in, then went on in a gentler tone:

"You know, don't you, Garrett, that the bullet you fired was afterward extracted from Mr. Webb's body?"

Mr. Dakin, a little slow as usual, was on his feet with an objection. It was sustained, but the damage had been done. The district attorney consulted his notes, and then came rapid-fire questions concerning the missing cockatoo. Very deftly he emphasized the point, already implanted in the minds of the jurors, that the only conceivable explanation for the cockatoo's disappearance was to be found in the murderer's fear that she would betray him.

Then Mr. Baines' manner changed; there was a little purr in his voice.

"Garrett, you have told the jury how you went to a friend and borrowed money to pay back what you stole. You knew that your stepfather was fairly well off, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You knew that the theft of a few hundred dollars meant nothing to a man in his position?"

"Yes."

"Then why were you in such a hurry to repay what you had stolen? Couldn't you have waited till you could earn the money and didn't have to borrow it?"

"I wanted to tell Mr. Webb to his face what I thought of him, and I didn't feel I could do it till I had paid him back."

"Oh, so that's it!" Mr. Baines' tone was still gentleness itself. "You wanted to go to him with a clean breast. Was that your only reason?"

"Yes, the only one."

"The *only* one, Garrett?" His tone and manner conveyed worlds of meaning.

Jimmie felt bewildered. What was the prosecutor driving at? Then, glancing over the jury-box, he caught a thin, knowing grin on the face of juror number seven. In a moment Mr. Baines' innuendo was clear. Very subtly he had sought to instil the suggestion in the minds of the jurors that the defendant's real purpose had been to create a favorable impression and an appearance of innocence.

"Positively," said Jimmie, but he knew it sounded flat.

"That's all," said Mr. Baines, waving his hand complacently; and then court adjourned for the day.

THE defense fared no better the following day. Mr. Dakin called character witnesses, questioning each at such great length that Jimmie suspected he was merely sparring for time. Things were going badly for Mr. Dakin. Mr. Baines succeeded in discrediting much of the evidence intended to build up a character for a man just out of prison. At one point, during the testimony of the young friend from whom Jimmie had borrowed the money, he sauntered to the exhibits table and absently picked up the sheet of paper on which the dead man had recorded his belief that his stepson was capable of murder. It seemed a very casual act, but the effect was not lost.

"We aren't licked yet," was the most optimistic comment Mr. Dakin had to offer when he saw his client in the iron-grilled enclosure that evening.

He lowered his big head and played with his watch-chain.

"The things that worry me most are the cockatoo and the bullet," he grumbled. "It's the kind of stuff that appeals to a jury. Baines has hammered it into their heads so hard they can't see anything else. The bullet and the fool cockatoo are his strongest points."

Jimmie nodded gloomily.

"There isn't much time," said Mr. Dakin. "The case will go to the jury tomorrow afternoon. Hang it all, Jimmie, we've simply got to find that bullet. Or else the cockatoo. Unless we do—"

It was a curious sort of pause. The words merely ceased and hung suspended, as if Mr. Dakin's vocal cords had suddenly snapped. He was gazing toward the window, kinky brows drawn up, his head at a slant, a queer intentness in his sallow face.

"By heck, Jimmie!"

Jimmie followed his gaze, but all he could see was a pigeon with gray and faintly purplish plumage strutting pertly on the window ledge. It was just an ordinary pigeon, yet the lawyer stared at it as if the bird's sleek wings sheltered the answer to all his perplexities.

"Gosh!" he said, "why didn't I think of that before?"

The bird, as if resenting his rude stare, flapped her wings and soared away.

"What?" Jimmie asked.

"You saw that pigeon, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

The lawyer reached for his hat.

"I've got another hunch, Jimmie. It's a sure-fire one this time, I think. Good news for you in the morning. So long."

Jimmie stared at him as he bustled out. He smiled faintly. There was something a little ludicrous about Mr. Dakin's excitement.

THE atmosphere of the court-room seemed to have changed overnight when he took his seat beside Mr. Dakin the next morning. The jurors looked as hostile as before, but Mr. Baines seemed very repressed and subdued. Mr. Dakin looked rather worn, also a little shabbier than usual, but there was an air of quiet exaltation about his big frame.

"Baines and I have just had a conference with the judge *in camera*," he whispered.

Jimmie tingled. The lawyer's excitement, though repressed, was infectious. In front of him lay a huge parcel roughly done up in newspaper. Jimmie was curious to know what it contained, but the judge entered just then, and he gave Jimmie a queer look as he took his high seat.

"Knobbetts," called Mr. Dakin.

There was a little stir in the back of the room. Knobbetts, in garments that might have been handed down to him from his late employer, and with a look of faint surprise on his long face, took the witness stand.

"Knobbetts," began Mr. Dakin pleasantly, "I have a few more questions to ask you. You have told the jury that Mr. Webb brought a considerable amount of money with him to Cedar Cove. Exactly how much did he bring?"

"About a thousand dollars, sir. He meant to stay several months, and he wanted to have enough for running expenses. He explained that he didn't wish to open an account in the village because he didn't want people to know where he was."

"I see. So he brought a thousand dollars in cash. With the amount Garrett brought that afternoon, that made nearly eighteen hundred dollars. By the way, Knobbetts, how much did Mr. Webb pay you?"

"Eighty dollars a month."

"And you have been investing every penny of your savings in stocks?"

"Yes, sir," said Knobbetts a little uneasily, casting a quick glance at the parcel lying in front of the lawyer.

"You have always been thrifty, haven't you, Knobbetts? You believe in making every penny count?"

"Well, I think it's a good idea, sir," said Knobbetts virtuously.

"Excellent, Knobbetts. Now, you have testified that you drove to the village about two o'clock on the day of the murder. You had trouble with the car and had to walk part of the way back, so you did not return to Cedar Cove until half-past five or six. Couldn't you be a little more explicit as to the time?"

"No, sir, I don't believe I can. In the excitement of finding Mr. Webb dead I didn't notice the time."

"That's natural enough. Are you sure, though, that Mr. Webb was dead when you returned?"

The witness winced a little at this peculiar question. "Oh, quite sure, sir."

"Tell the jury again what you did when you found Mr. Webb's body."

"I ran to a telephone and notified the village authorities."

"You had to go on foot?

"Oh, yes, the car was out of commission."

"How far did you have to run?"

"About a mile and a half. There was no telephone nearer than that."

"You must have been out of breath. Then you went back to Cedar Cove and waited for the officers. They were slow in arriving, I understand. How long did you have to wait?"

"About half an hour."

"And what did you do?"

"Just waited, sir."

"Did you see anything of the cockatoo?"

"No, sir, but I didn't give her a thought. I was too upset over the murder."

"Of course," Mr. Dakin nodded affably. "What about the tramp? See anything of him?"

"No, I didn't see him either."

"Well, I understand Mr. Webb had given him some money earlier in the day. Probably Cedar Cove couldn't hold him after that. Did you see Jimmie Garrett?"

"No, sir."

"So you were alone in the house for half an hour. Did you stay inside all the time?"

"Yes, sir. It had started to rain quite hard."

"You didn't take a walk to while away

the time? There's a queer rock formation about a third of a mile from the house, I understand. It's called Gideon's Pulpit. There's a path winding to it along the shore, and part of it leads over a surface of reddish clay, making it very slippery in a rain. You didn't happen to walk in that direction?"

A wave of pallor swept Knobbetts' long face. He gripped the arms of the witness stand.

"No," sullenly. "I've told you I didn't walk anywhere."

"Do you always tell the truth, Knobbetts?"

The witness looked at the district attorney as if expecting an objection to such questioning, but none came. Knobbetts gave a shrug for an answer.

"By the way, Knobbetts," said Mr. Dakin softly, "have you ever owned a revolver?"

"A revolver? Never, sir. Not recently, that is. Not in a good many years."

JIMMIE, growing more and more excited, looked at Mr. Dakin. The lawyer's round, flabby face was ostentatiously artless.

"Think hard, Knobbetts. Didn't you discover by accident one day that Mr. Webb owned a revolver? Didn't it strike you that a revolver was a good thing to have, and didn't you go and buy one just like Mr. Webb's, thinking it might come in handy some day?"

The witness gave his questioner a long, trembling stare.

"No, sir!" he shouted. "I never—"

"No use getting excited, Knobbetts. Let me see, you have a sister living somewhere, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Knobbetts, fidgeting and moistening his lips. "She lives in Bradford."

Mr. Dakin nodded. "That's about forty miles from here, isn't it? I understand your sister is in poor circumstances. Now and then you have been sending her parcels containing articles you have picked up around Mr. Webb's house—nothing of very great value and nothing that Mr. Webb would be likely to miss. Isn't that so?"

The witness mopped his face with his handkerchief.

"I never took anything without Mr. Webb's permission," he protested.

"Perhaps not. Your sister would sell the articles, and you would go fifty-fifty on the proceeds. Generally you sent them in paper parcels. But the last batch you sent her was in a suitcase. The suitcase was locked, and you forgot to send her the key, so she didn't open it. You didn't intend she should open it, did you?"

Knobbetts' labored breathing could be heard all over the tense court-room. He twisted his neck and moved his lips, but no words came.

"And so," said Mr. Dakin, "the suitcase wasn't opened until I ran out to Bradford last night and called on your sister. By the way, Knobbetts, you sent the suitcase the day after Mr. Webb was murdered and the same day Garrett was arrested. Isn't that true?"

"No!" cried Knobbetts in a thin, cracked voice. "I see what you're driving at. It isn't true. It's all lies!"

Very calmly Mr. Dakin opened the parcel on the table. He exhibited a revolver. "Recognize it, Knobbetts?"

The witness shuddered convulsively. Mr. Dakin exhibited a pair of rough shoes.

"Recognize them, Knobbetts?" No answer, only a hoarse, inarticulate stutter. "You tried to clean them, but you were in a hurry and didn't do a very good job. There was still bits of caked reddish clay around the heels and in the seams around the soles. You must have taken a walk to Gideon's Pulpit, after all. There's no red clay anywhere else in the neighborhood of Cedar Cove. Why did you go there, Knobbetts?"

Still Knobbetts had no answer. He merely twisted in his chair and glared now and then at the lawyer.

"Your honor," said Mr. Dakin, "I move that the indictment against my client be dismissed. The murderer sits in this chair. Garrett is absolutely innocent. Last night I found the cockatoo and the bullet of which the prosecution has made so much. I found the cockatoo where Knobbetts buried it near Gideon's Pulpit—and the bullet was in the cockatoo."

MR. DAKIN could not resist making a dramatic gesture as he added the last seven words. Jimmie started out of his chair, then sat down again. A buzzing went around the court-room. There was rapping for order.

"It's not for me to explain what happened," said Mr. Dakin modestly. He looked a little taller and broader as he stood before the bench. "I might offer a theory, though. The cockatoo was in the habit of flying in and out of her cage, sometimes perching in the oak just outside the window. She sat in the oak when Garrett fired the shot. The bullet lodged against her breastbone. Knobbetts was standing outside the window. He saw Garrett give Mr. Webb the money and, a few minutes later, run excitedly from the house. A devil flew into Knobbetts. He has always been greedy. He wanted the eighteen hundred dollars in the desk, and he knew Mr. Webb would not give up the money without a fight. It took him only a minute to go to his room and get his revolver and shoot Mr. Webb dead. He knew Garrett would be accused of the crime, that all the circumstances would point to Garrett as the murderer. But Knobbetts added one more circumstance when he buried the cockatoo. Garrett, had he been the cold-blooded murderer the State has tried to make him out, would have done just that."

His honor looked at the wretched figure in the witness chair. Then he looked at Jimmie Garrett, a little dazed, but with a straight gaze and a fine bearing.

"The court will take the motion under advisement," he announced. "Officer, you will place this witness under arrest. Defendant is released in custody of counsel."

Mr. Dakin placed his great soft paw on Jimmie's shoulder.

"Well, Jimmie, we've won."

"Thanks to you," said Jimmie.

"No." Mr. Dakin's heavy eyes strayed for a moment to the window-sill. "Thanks to the pigeon."

So You Like Humorous Stories, Do You? Well—

There's a gloriously humorous story in next month's Everybody's—"Strong Drink is Raging" by Blatz Henderson; even better than his "Menace at Bar X" in this issue. And there are five other short stories ranging from the tragic "The Ship That Tried to be Honest" by Frank H. Shaw to the highly amusing "Rabbit" by Neil McMillan.

(A gentle reminder! The April Everybody's is on sale March 20th.)

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where it is suggested writers, readers and the editors gather for informal discussion

LAST month we lamented the fact that we had not heard from readers about the change in EVERYBODY'S. It was a foolish lament because the first changed EVERYBODY'S was not even on sale when we voiced our sorrows.

But now we've heard. We've heard all right. Good and plenty! Our head is bloody but unbowed.

In that first new EVERYBODY'S, the December issue, we started this talk by asking, "What do you think of the change?" And somebody who signed himself W. W. C. tore out the page, encircled that question with a very black pencil mark and wrote "Rotten!"

And that was the first comment we had from a reader!

All that day we absolutely slunk around the office meeting no one's eye.

But the next day brought other comments, very different sort of comments. Grace Norton of Dallas, Texas—bless her heart!—wrote this:

> I have just completed the current issue of EVERYBODY'S, and to say that I enjoyed it is putting it mildly. Every story is not only interesting, but gripping, and much as I have always liked EVERYBODY'S, the new style of publication is a vast improvement over the old. Somehow, the stories have taken on a new zest.
>
> Living in Texas as I do, made the scenes of "The Air Rangers" very real to me, and the story itself is remarkably interesting. In fact they all are, and when one starts to name examples, the entire list begins to include itself. Of course I found some more to my particular taste than others, and one especially was the "Hill of Gold," written by Leslie McFarlane.

Then letters began to come in thick and fast. Don't think we're trying to pretend they were all favorable. They weren't. But we can say honestly that the favorable ones far outweighed the unfavorable.

We were particularly grateful to E. S. Harvey of Salt Lake City. His letter is so judicial:

> You are probably anxious to know how your radical change in magazine content meets the public approval.
>
> I have been a more or less constant reader of EVERYBODY'S since its inception. When you announced your change I awaited the December number somewhat dubiously, expecting, I must confess, to be disappointed. Am very glad to state that I was very much pleased with the issue, enjoyed every story and had a couple of evenings of good old solid reading.

The story that made the greatest hit in the December issue was "Slow Freight South," by Elwood F. Pierce. Any number of readers wrote that they liked it tremendously.

H. M. Allery of Chicago, for instance, said:

> I do not know whether or not it means anything to the editors of a magazine to be told that readers enjoy certain stories appearing in their magazine, but I feel that I would like to tell you of the satisfaction I have in reading a story in your December issue entitled "Slow Freight South," written by Elwood F. Pierce.
>
> The story is highly humorous and has a style that appeals to me very much. I believe more stories of this nature would be received with pleasure and satisfaction by the average reader, and hope that I may have the pleasure of reading further stories by this author in future issues of your publication.

We are glad to say that we're planning to run at least one highly humorous story in every issue of the new EVERYBODY'S.

Last month we gave you "The Bungaloobooboo Lion" which made us, at least, laugh aloud, disturbing the decorous silence of these editorial offices; in this March issue there's "The Menace at Bar X" and next month Blatz Henderson who wrote "The Menace" has the funniest war story we've ever read with the rather startling title, "Strong Drink Is Raging."

Of the writers in this issue, we can't think of much to say—and we don't mean that the way it sounds.

But Ared White, who has promised to contribute regularly to EVERYBODY'S, refuses to let us blurb about him; of Frank H. Shaw we know little except that he's an extremely popular English writer and we like his stuff and have more stories coming from him; Captain Dingle and Beatrice Grimshaw are too well known to require any feeble murmurs on our part. (Captain Dingle, by the way, has a story in "The Best Short Stories of 1926" which, among writers of short stories, is considered a high mark of honor.)

And so it goes!

One interesting fact that deserves mention is that the stories in EVERYBODY'S seem to come from every corner of the earth. Beatrice Grimshaw lives in New Guinea; L. G. Blochman is on the staff of the Paris *Times;* John Steuart Erskine is in Central America; Herman Landon is on his way to Australia; Mary Gaunt is in Italy and so on.

Only the editor is chained to his desk. Why not cheer him up with a letter?

O. G.

Features to Appear Next Month

The Smiling Death

by FRANCIS D. GRIERSON

The first chapters of a new novel of crime and mystery that kept us up all night reading it. It's so engrossing that it seems hardly fair to publish it as a serial.

The Long Rider

by WILLIAM CORCORAN

A complete novelette of the West in which action follows upon action with bewildering rapidity—and yet there's room left for some very nice sentiment.

Del Rio Peaches

by MILLARD WARD

A complete novelette of gun-running to a toy revolution in Central America with a hero who's a humorous super-man and a most engaging sort of character.

Also the continuation of Beatrice Grimshaw's novel; the conclusion (alas!) of Captain Dingle's "Flying Kestrel"; and some corking short stories including the most humorous war story we've ever read, "Strong Drink Is Raging," by Blatz Henderson.